

summit

october / 1972 75¢



"DON'T LAUGH, IT ONLY ENCOURAGES HIM!"

Climbing in Kashmir

By Arlene Blum

Any scorched living being that comes to Kashmir, even if it is roasted bird of prey, will acquire its plumage and wings here.

— *Travel Guide to Kashmir*

There's a local saying that those who come to the beautiful vale of Kashmir never want to leave, and I can certainly see why. It's a lush green valley surrounded on all sides by snowy mountains. By Himalayan standards, most of these peaks are neither very high nor very difficult. Consequently Kashmir is not on the expedition circuit and many of its fine peaks are unclimbed. This makes it an ideal place for small groups like ours.

During the past month we've visited three major climbing areas in Kashmir and climbed seven peaks ranging from easy snow walks to moderately difficult first ascents. Best of all, between climbs we return in a few hours to the pleasures of luxurious houseboat living on the lakes of Srinagar. Do I dare add that this month costs less than it would cost to live as a poor student in Berkeley for a similar amount of time?

One rainy afternoon in mid-May we arrived in Srinagar. Fortunately we'd been given the address of Mohammed Ashraf, Secretary of the Jammu and Kashmir Mountaineering and Hiking Club who took us along to a club meeting. We were soon being bombarded with suggestions of peaks to climb. The varied opportunities for trekking through the high flower-filled meadows of Kashmir are well-known. In the States, we'd heard of Kolahoi (17,899') and Haramukh (16,890'), which have each been climbed several times and assumed these were the only peaks to climb in Kashmir. Nothing could be further from

the truth. We saw slides, movies, and scrapbooks of club trips showing all sorts of fine peaks to be climbed in Kashmir.

The J & K Mountain Club members suggested that we begin with several conditioning climbs of low peaks that would afford views of the area and then try some more difficult first ascents. An excellent idea.

Our first climb was Mahdev (the Big Giant), a 13,000-foot peak ten miles north of Srinagar. After an hour bus ride we alighted at Harwan (6,000') and headed up through rice paddies and wheat fields. Numerous sacred cows were eating crops to the apparent unconcern of the local farmers. Camp was pitched in a forest of enormous fir trees. First such forest we'd been in since leaving the States. The good clean smell made me feel as though I were in the Cascades.

Next morning we walked through a meadow and up gradual snow to the summit (13,013') and a magnificent view of an ocean of mountains. The Himalaya at last! Perhaps only foothills, but still incredibly beautiful. There was the rugged face of Haramukh and the steep pyramid of Kolahoi to the north, the Pir Panchal range to the southwest, and far away to the east the twin pyramids of Nun Kun (23,410'), one of the most beautiful mountains I've ever seen. In between were myriad lower unclimbed peaks. After a few hours of sunbathing we glissaded down and were soon back in Srinagar sipping tea.

A few days later we left with two members of the Mountain Club for Gulmarg (9,000'), a mountain resort twenty miles west of Srinagar. Along with scores of Indian tourists in brightly colored saris and pajama suits we walked up 1,500 feet from the bus stop to the town which boasted a chairlift and a golf course. Skiing in India!

Continuing from Gulmarg to Khilanmarg (10,500') where we planned to camp, I looked up and saw an enormous mountain. It appeared quite far away, but still much higher than the nearby 16,000-foot peaks. Yes, there was the silver saddle. Nanga Parbat! Completely clear. After so many years of reading and dreaming of the 8,000-meter peaks, I felt awe at finally seeing one. It looked not unfriendly in the warm sunlight, but I knew how fast it could change.

Next morning Nanga Parbat was decorated with a lenticular cloud. I thought of Herman Buhl and shivered. In a couple of hours, we climbed to the second highest summit of Alpather Peak (13,600') above Khilanmarg. The highest summit several hundred yards away was right on the Indian-Pakistan cease-fire line in no-man's land and considered a very dangerous ascent. Down we went in a 3,000-foot glissade, mostly on our backs, head first, as the slope was not very steep. Quite fun.

After a short trip to Sonamarg near the Ladach border, we headed south to Phalgam with four members of the J and K Mountain Club. We climbed Tulijan Peak (15,900'), a rather unusual first ascent that I'll tell you about in a separate letter.

During a slide show on the Amarnath Cave trek we noticed three beautiful snow peaks. Ashraf told us they were the Shishnag peaks, apparently unclimbed. Before I tell you about the Shishnag peaks, I'd better tell you about the pilgrimage to the cave at Amarnath. This four-day, thirty-mile trek is one of the most holy pilgrimages for Hindus. Each August, the track is full of about forty thousand of the devout — crawling, walking, riding ponies or being carried in dandy's to the cave. The cave contains a very huge ice stalagmite which is said to be Shiva's lingam. The stalagmite's size is supposed to change with the waxing and waning of the moon.

The trek to the cave goes by the three beautiful Shishnag peaks, Brama (16,300'), Shiva (16,500'), and Vishnu (16,700'). Shiva, the central peak, is an elegant icy pyramid called Kunyir Hayan on topographic maps of the area. A large tumbling icefall descends from the three mountains to the lake below at 11,800 feet.

June 4th we left Phalgam with 300 pounds of equipment and food, including fourteen pounds of delicious Kashmir cherries. For the first few days we brought local meat and bread, and Indian canned goods for the duration. All the packaged food was made in India as there are no imported foods allowed in the country. The net result was somewhat heavier and more monotonous than food from a U. S. supermarket, but still quite adequate for the trip.

The first day's trek led ten miles to Chandanuari (19,500'). We arrived in about three hours at the comfortable government dak bungalow and waited for the rain to stop two days later. We continued in the warm sunlight with three porters. Although wearing shoes made of braided grass, the porters never complained about their sixty-pound loads or the steep slippery snow that covered most of the track. They seemed quite grateful to receive about \$1.50 a day for walking nearly thirty miles with heavy loads. Not too surprising, as a young doctor or engineer working for the government of India only earns about \$40.00 a month.

Reaching Shishnag Lake, we passed huts collapsed from the burden of last winter's record snowfall. Beautiful peaks, some of which looked quite Andean with steep fluted faces, began appearing. The Shishnag peaks? Yes. From the porch of our hut we could see all three quite clearly. Looked like good climbs. Next day we descended to the lake and slogged in the very hot sun to an excellent campsite in a huge filled-in crevasse at 13,600 feet.

Very early in the morning we worked our way through the icefall above camp. Snow conditions were bad after the recent storm: breakable crust over deep powder. Above the icefall was a plateau (14,900 feet) from which rose the three peaks. The highest and hardest was on the right, the lowest and easiest was on the left. All appeared to offer enjoyable climbs under good snow conditions.

For several hours we slogged toward the west ridge of the center peak through calf-deep snow. This was a drag, and we were about to give up when one slope steepened and the snow became more firm. We ascended a 50-degree face to the ridge which was even steeper. In a few hours we were on top looking at a fine view of the Ladach plateau to the west, the ever beautiful pyramids of Nun Kun, and the Brama Bal range to the south which we hoped to visit next. Our enjoyment of the summit was cut short by black clouds and peals of thunder. We hurried down the west ridges to a gendarme where we rappelled in light snowfall and continued down through the plateau and icefall. Our second first ascent!



*A temple in Srinagar.
The Brama Bal range.*





View from the summit of Alpather.

A rest stop with a distant view of the Himalayas.

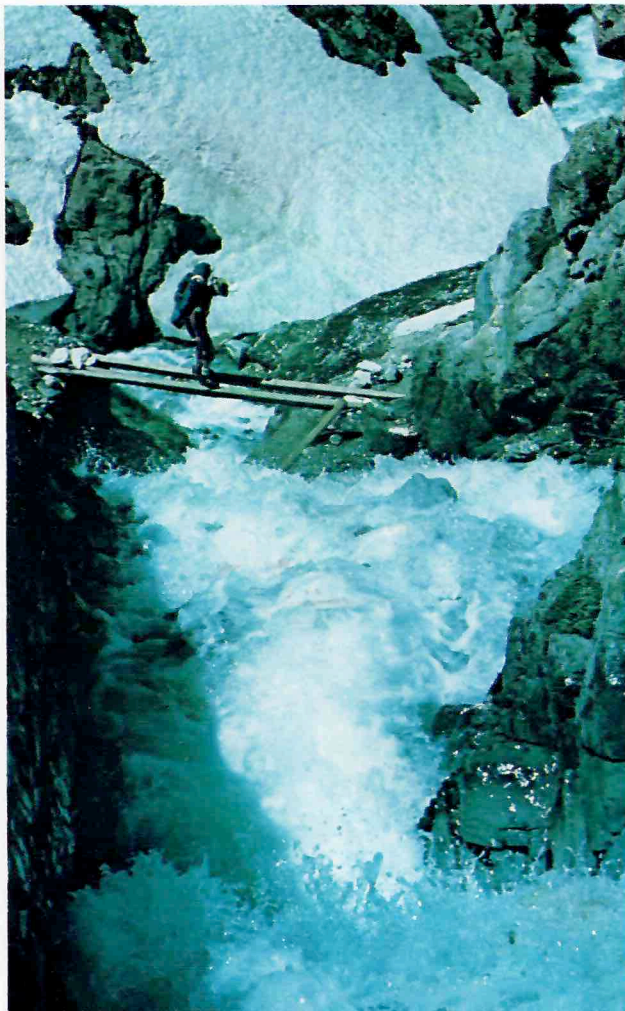


After a snowy rest day we trudged back to the plateau. Joel and Toby tried to climb Vishnu while Dave and I headed for the easier and lower Brama. Our climb was distinguished by knee-deep snow. After breaking trail up to the ridge we were rewarded on top by a fantastic view of Nun Kun. Joel and Toby climbed a very exposed and steep rib and traversed one-third mile of corniced summit ridge to the top of Vishnu. Twenty-four hours later we were lounging on the porch of the hut at Shishnag Lake, looking at the three peaks we'd just climbed.

Going down we found a flimsy bridge we'd crossed on the way up had lost another board. One of the two remaining boards was cracked making the crossing most exciting. If the board broke, the person crossing would be swept down the 150-foot waterfall underneath. Further along we met our first Sadhu (holy man) of the season making the pilgrimage to Amarnath. He had no food or warm clothing for the long difficult trek. The Sadhu and our group stared at each other in mutual amazement. In a few hours we were back in Phalgam.

If you'd like to climb here, contact the secre-

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An exciting crossing on a flimsy bridge with only two boards, one of which was cracked—a waterfall thunders 150 feet below.

tary of the J & K Mountain Club, Mohammed Ashraf, 303 Jawahar Nagar, Srinagar Kashmir for information. With the help of the mountain club, trips here are relatively easy to arrange. As Kashmir has been a tourist resort for centuries, there are adequate accommodations and facilities throughout the country. Government dak bungalows or forest rest houses are found on many trekking routes and cost from 25¢ to \$1.00 a night for a clean room large enough for the four of us. We spent about \$2.50 a day each for food, porters, ponies and a guide for the trips. The guide was of no value except for arranging porters. Ponies or porters cost about \$1.50 a day each. Ponies carry at least sixty kilos and porters sixty pounds. Air India has a three-month excursion fare for about \$500 for flights between New York or San Francisco and Delhi, making a trip to Kashmir quite inexpensive.



A Sadhu (holy man) making his way to Amarnath Cave, a holy pilgrimage made each year by 40,000 devout Hindus.

There are many other fine unclimbed peaks in Kashmir. Unfortunately the topographic maps of the country are classified and not available. It is a good idea to try to get information about areas in which you plan to climb before reaching Kashmir. Mountaineering journals are not available in Srinagar. However, the J & K Mountain Club has some information about good areas in which to climb. Yusuf Chapri, H. B. Rowallen, Sonuarbad, Srinagar, Kashmir will organize treks at moderate prices.

The monsoon usually does not reach Kashmir, allowing climbing from May through September, although the best weather is usually in June and September. As is becoming usual, we were stormed on frequently. Oh well, maybe the weather will be better to the south in the Kistuar Himal where we're going next.

Sincerely, Arlene