

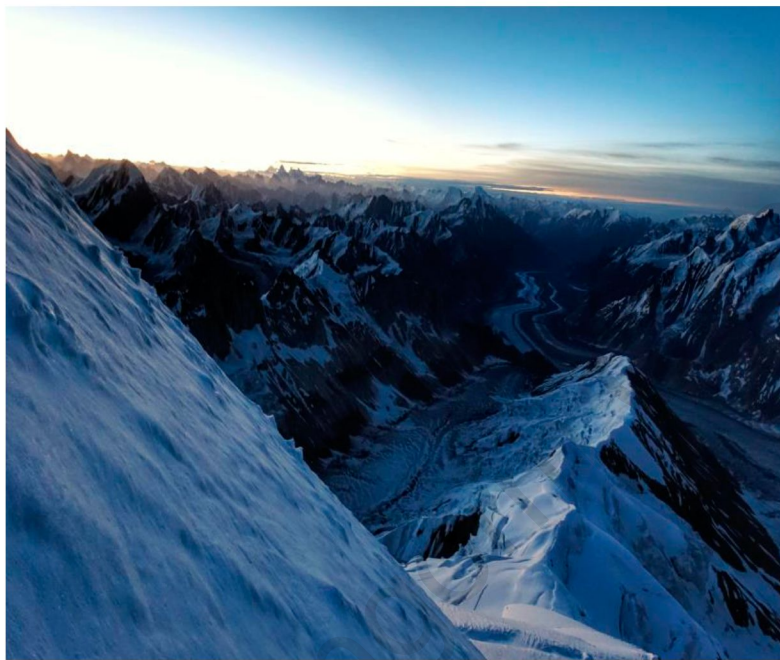
SPANTIK (7027M) - ALTITUDE, STYLE AND EXHAUSTION**GRAHAM WYLLIE**

In the summer of 2019, I headed to Pakistan for the first time in 11 years to attempt my first 7000m peak, Spantik. We were attempting the mountain in as pure a style as we could manage so no fixed ropes, no high altitude porters (HAPS) and only one tent above Base Camp. My climbing partner, Andra Gherghiceanu, abandoned her attempt after we failed to establish Camp 3 (6300m) meaning that a long push from Camp 2 (5500m) became the only option given the time we had left and the weather forecasts.



Above, Porters on The Chomolunga Glacier.

Photo Graham Wyllie.



Above, The South East Ridge.

Photo Graham Wyllie

I was higher than I had ever been: somewhere above 6500m on Spantik's Summit ridge. It had taken three weeks to get here. Three weeks of flying, driving, trekking, climbing and acclimatising. I had felt strong since we left Camp 2 at around 01.30 but now the altitude meant that the few steps I was taking were backed up by rests and heavy breathing. Progress was slow and I could see Messner in his hooded down-jacket ahead of me.

Aside from my body my mind was feeling the altitude too, playing tricks on me and polluting my concentration with confusion and playful misinformation. It was not Messner I reminded myself every so often, it was Giampaolo or 'Jumpy', an Italian Guide from the Dolomites. This was our first ever day climbing with each other; we'd met barely a week ago but circumstances had brought us together. Along with instances of *deja-vu* I felt another familiar presence with us, an old woman, perhaps



Jumpy at 6,200m.

Photo Graham Wyllie.

somebody's mother approving of our zig-zagging trail through the ankle deep snow. There was a rocky section with steep snow ahead. It didn't seem to be getting closer. I kept following Jumpy's tracks; I was now too far behind to take my turn breaking trail. If he had been closer perhaps I would have told him I was going back.

Some time went by with little progress; a constant struggle and the same hallucinations. Before long the icy wind provided us with a new problem and every 5-10 mins we stopped to warm our freezing hands. As time raced by, we inched towards the rocky outcrop. This must be it. Just another 20 or 30m of struggle then the summit and we could go down. Eventually we surmounted the steep section but the ridge continued upwards. I caught up with Jumpy. He said another 50m altitude to go. I tried to break trail but he overtook me. The struggle went on for so long and then we arrived. A bare plateau of snow. The



Graham at 6,300m.

Photo Giampaolo Corona.

fruits of an idea I had while alone in a Canazei bar over a year ago and all the planning, travelling and climbing since. I felt emotional. The pure joy that I've only experienced a few times before, when dreams are realised, when I am exactly where I know I should be.

We didn't spend long there, maybe ten minutes leaving to start the descent at 11.30. The first part of the descent went well. We retraced our steps down the ridge and reached our bags on the plateau. Then we moved towards the top of the SE ridge and the normal site for Camp 3. The section between this and Camp 2 is the technical crux of the route. Andra and myself had had a bit of an epic here the preceding week when we tried to establish Camp 3. For most climbers this section is

made safe by fixed ropes but no team had fixed it in almost a month leaving them now in an incomplete and dangerous state. Free climbing this upwards in good conditions is easy, downclimbing this while exhausted and after the midday sun has taken its toll on the ice is a different matter.



Approaching Summit Cone.

Photo Graham Wyllie.



Graham on the Summit.

Photo Giampaolo Corona.

Jumpy went on down. There wasn't much he could do for me. I methodically front-pointed my way down the steep sugary ice, stopping often for breaks. I toyed with the idea of making an abalakov to abseil but it wasn't practical. It would have justified carrying the rope though, it was still coiled in my sack as we had solo'd together all day. Eventually I reached easier ground beyond a bergschrund and made quick progress down a snow slope then the rocky spur that runs for about 100m down the centre of the face. Beyond this the lower half of the face was more sugary ice albeit at a less serious angle than higher up. Without exhaustion I would normally make quick work of this terrain despite its poor condition. Today was different. I advanced facing down the slope and constantly struggled for my footing. The first section went OK. Starting down the next section my crampons gave way and I began to slide down the slope. After 10-15m my ice axe arrest held and I came to a halt with an avalanche of sugary ice flowing around me. I front-pointed down the rest of the slope.

The rest of the journey to Camp 2 was without further incident. There are crevasses but they are obvious and easy to cross or avoid. The only other issue was the snow. Now softened by the heat of the day it was torturous. Nevermind, I told myself, soon I could blissfully collapse in my tent at Camp 2. At around 16.30 when I arrived Jumpy had packed his tent away and was waiting for me. He informed me of incoming bad weather and that I needed to go down to Base Camp (BC). It was the last thing I wanted to hear but he was right and staying wasn't really an option. I packed up the tent, cooking and sleeping equipment and ended up with quite a hefty sack.

I knew the route down from Camp 2 well by now. Andra and myself had travelled it a few times in our efforts to acclimatise and prepare for our summit attempt. Between Camp 2 at 5500m and Camp 1 at 5050m the route is an undulating snow ridge 4km long. It's quite exposed and scenic in places. There are occasional crevasses and cornices but nothing overly serious. The main issue travelling down at that time was the condition of the snow. Jumpy went on ahead. He kept an eye backwards to make sure I was progressing but there was no point in us both going at my exhausted methodical pace. Sometimes while sinking over my knees into the snow the familiar old woman was there. She knew about the deep snow and she made me feel a bit better about it.

Eventually I arrived at Camp 1 and it was getting dark so I put my headtorch on. I began to feel a bit better and was able to move a little faster. Perhaps this was the lower altitude catching up with me or the fact that the route from here is pretty much completely downhill. The path down to Base Camp from here was good. It was steep in places but well marked and snow free consisting mainly of dirt, scree and shattered although somewhat stable rock. About two thirds of the way down a headtorch grew close. It was Andra who offered her congratulations. An emotional Paco, our cook/localguide/fixer, emerged from the darkness and gave me a hug. The happiest anyone has ever been to see me I think! He carried my sack the remaining few hundred metres to Base Camp arriving sometime after 21.00 where I was met by the Catalan expedition and Jagged Globe's cooks and HAPs who congratulated me also.

In the end I am very pleased with the style of my ascent. A long push from Camp 2 was never going to be easy especially to come back down to BC the same day. In hindsight had Andra and I managed to establish Camp 3 then I believe we would have summited together. This would however have left us stuck at Camp 3 through a weekend of bad weather. A long push from Camp 2 became the only option given the time we had left and this is certainly not the easy way. The lack of fixed ropes also meant that risk on the serious descent down to Camp 2 from the plateau when energy levels were low, had to be carefully considered. Both Jumpy, who has considerable experience on 8000m peaks, and myself felt that Spantik was harder than its reputation suggests. This may have been down to the long alpine style nature of our ascent but even so I feel that it is not a peak to be underestimated. It is a 7000m peak with a long route and technical passages that are subject to Karakorum weather and conditions.

It is a lot of time and effort to climb peaks of this scale. It had taken 4 weeks of travelling, trekking, acclimatising and climbing and that is just to have a chance at the summit and does not include preparation before the trip; the logistics, kit, permits and visas. How well you acclimatise, staying healthy and being fit are all decisive factors and of course tie in with the level of risk you are prepared to take in a hostile environment. The weather always has its say and you can easily spend days sitting in Camp waiting for it to change as I did on a previous

unsuccessful expedition to a different peak in the range. Even with success, about half of our time on Spantik was spent resting or waiting for weather at Base Camp. The journey itself: the places and the people encountered are all to be appreciated, because if it is only viewed as a means to a summit then it's going to be a long and potentially disappointing trip.

For more of my writing see my blog: <https://grahamwyllie.blogspot.com>

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