
A Peak-Bagger's Guide to the Eastern Kishtwar

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(Plates 20–23, 60, 61)

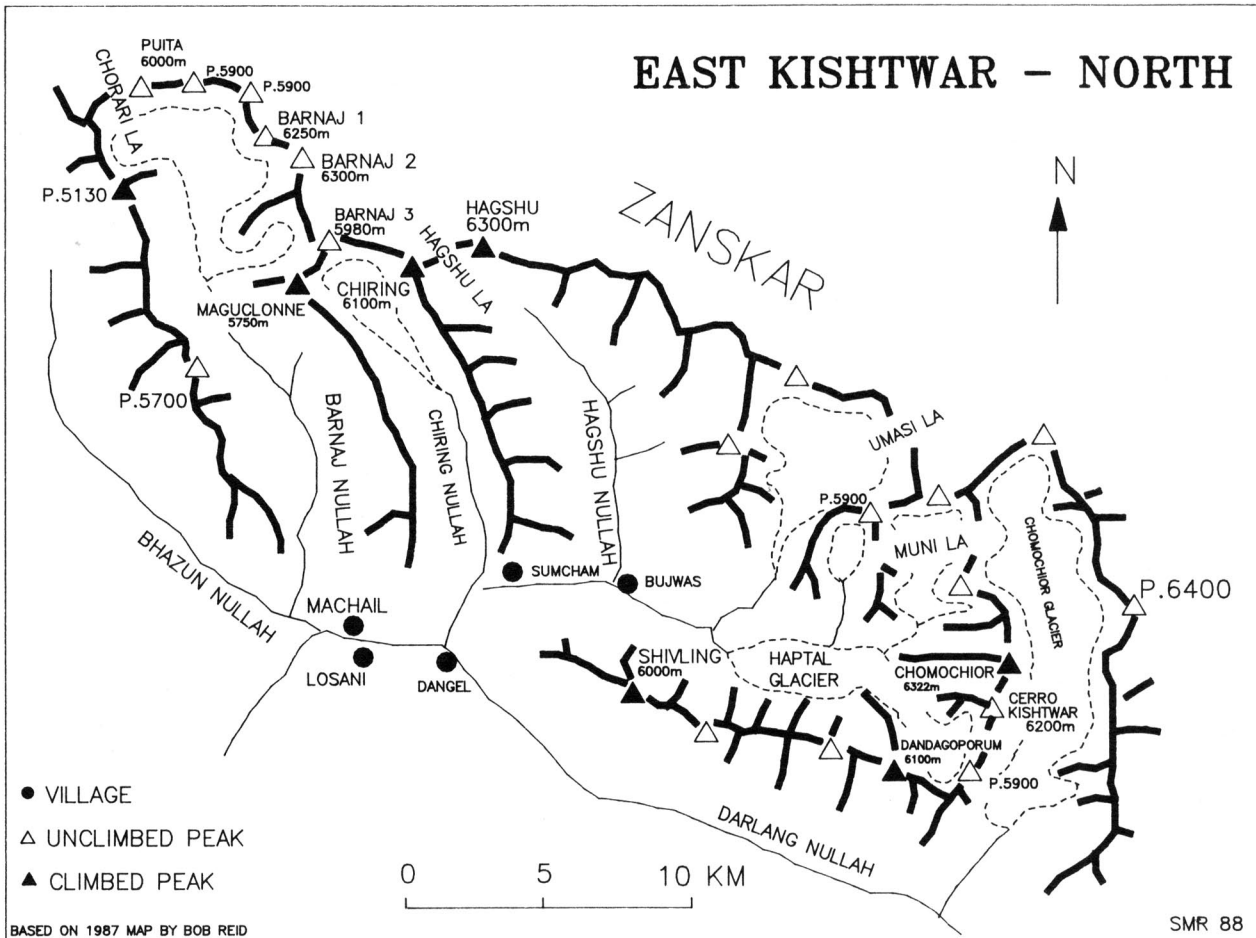
The first mountaineers to visit the eastern Kishtwar were probably two Austrians who, after making the first ascent of Mulkila in Lahul in 1939, were interned in India at the outbreak of war. Eight years later, in 1947, whilst waiting for their passages back home, Fritz Kolb and his friend visited the Kishtwar range. From a base at Machail they explored the eastern approaches to Sickle Moon (the highest peak in the range), and climbed two small peaks. They considered making an alpine-style ascent of Agyasol from the north, and it is interesting to speculate how the pair would have fared, for their plan was very much in the modern idiom. They decided to visit Zanskar instead, but their first attempt to cross the main Himalayan watershed failed when, much to their surprise, the difficult Muni La led to the Darlang Nullah. This not only confounded them, but has confused mapmakers ever since. They continued up the Darlang Nullah, crossed the remote Poat La into Zanskar and returned to the Kishtwar side over the Umasi La. Their time of three days for this arduous journey of nearly 100 miles was remarkable. Six days is now considered normal for trekking parties travelling from Machail to Padum over the Umasi La.

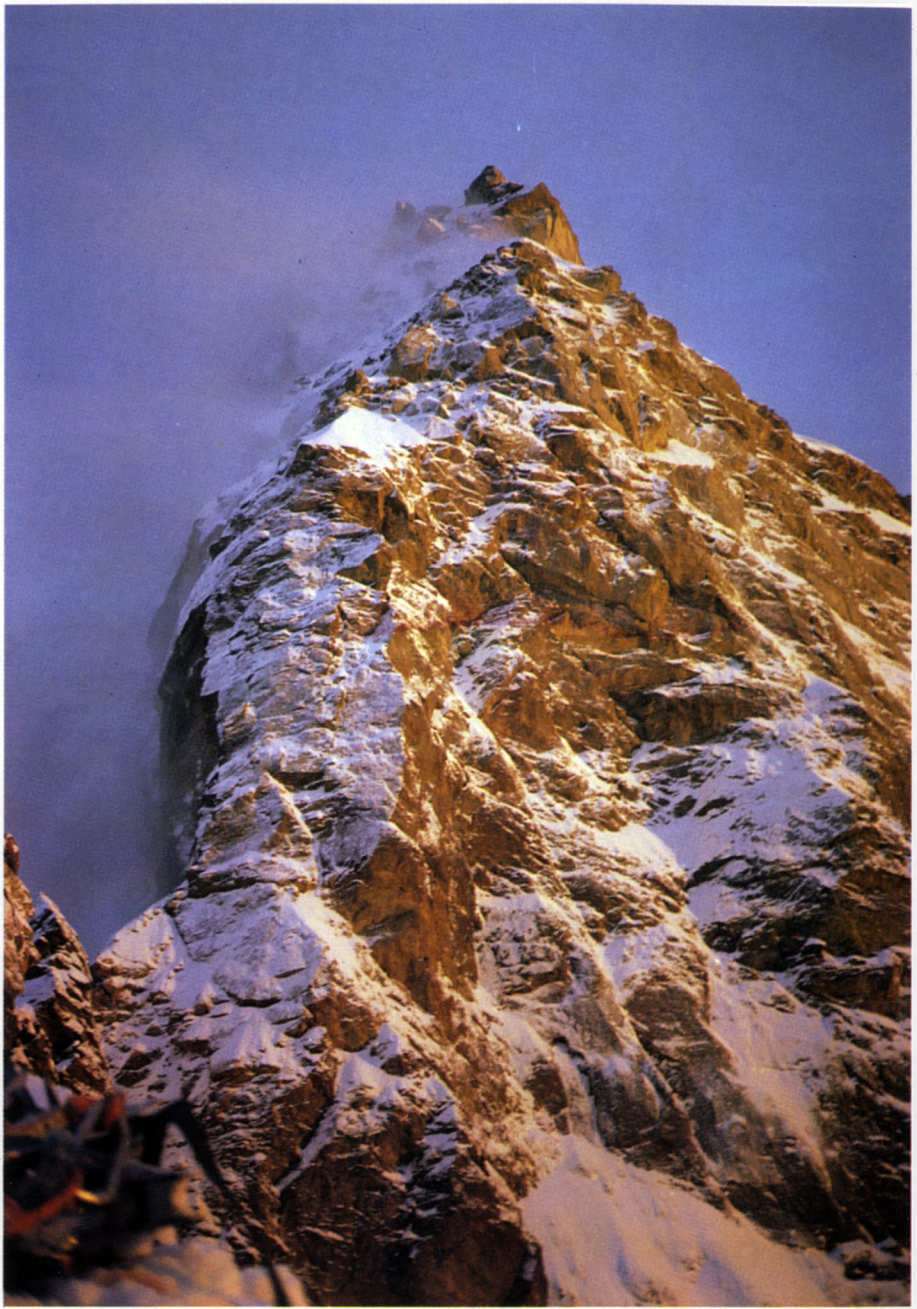
After a period of closure, the area was again open to foreigners in the early 1970s, and there was a rush to climb the obvious plums in the western region. In 1973 Nick Estcourt and Chris Bonington made a much publicized ascent of Brammah I (6416m), and two years later the Indian High Altitude Warfare School made the first ascent of the difficult Sickle Moon (6574m). Meanwhile, the peaks to the east were neglected until, in 1976 – nearly 30 years after Kolb's visit – a Japanese party attempted Barnaj II (6300m). They retreated low on the mountain, but climbed P5130m on the opposite side of the valley before leaving the area. The first peak in the eastern Kishtwar had been climbed. This focused attention on the Barnaj group for the next four years, and the following spring a larger Japanese expedition climbed the S ridge of Barnaj II to reach P6170m – the S summit. After being defeated by appalling weather in 1976, Paul Nunn returned in 1979 with John Yates and made an alpine-style repeat of the Japanese route on Barnaj II. In 1978 Lindsay Griffin and Phil Bartlett climbed Maguclonne (5750m), to the south of Barnaj III. Lindsay later visited the Chiring Nullah and soloed three small technical rock peaks of about 5600m. In 1980 another Japanese expedition repeated the 1977 route on Barnaj II, but failed to reach the central or main summits. It would appear that no expedition has visited the Barnaj group since, and, although there is some confusion as to the naming of the peaks, it seems certain that none of the main



20. *Mike Harrop on Agyasol's E ridge with rock buttress immediately behind. P5900m and Druid in background. (p 63)*

EAST KISHTWAR - NORTH





60. NE pillar of Mardi Phabrang from col. (p 63)

summits of the Barnaj group has been climbed. (In 1988, whilst exploring the Hagshu glacier from the north, Nick Kekus noted a straightforward snow route to one of the main Barnaj summits, so an approach from Zanskar may prove to be the simplest way of attempting these fine mountains.)

It was early in 1980, while I was looking for a suitable objective for a first Himalayan trip the following year, that Phil Bartlett suggested the Kishtwar during an OUMC lecture. Following up the Oxford connections, an examination of Lindsay Griffin's slides and those of Steve Venables (who had been trekking in the Hagshu Nullah in 1979) pointed to two objectives – Agyasol (6200m) and Kishtwar Shivling (6000m). Lindsay was very taken by the north side of Agyasol – as Fritz Kolb had been, who described it in his book *Himalayan Venture* as 'a beautiful, really splendid mountain'. Steve, on the other hand, pointed out the N face of Shivling, remarking (with much foresight) that climbing it would lead to instant superstar status! It was with a certain naïvety and arrogance, therefore, that we decided to attempt both mountains, and the 1981 OU expedition to Kishtwar was born. 'We' consisted of three students – Mike Harrop, Nick Barrett and myself – but John Wilkinson and Roger Everett, together with his wife Dairena Gaffney, came along as well to balance our youthful enthusiasm with a little more experience.

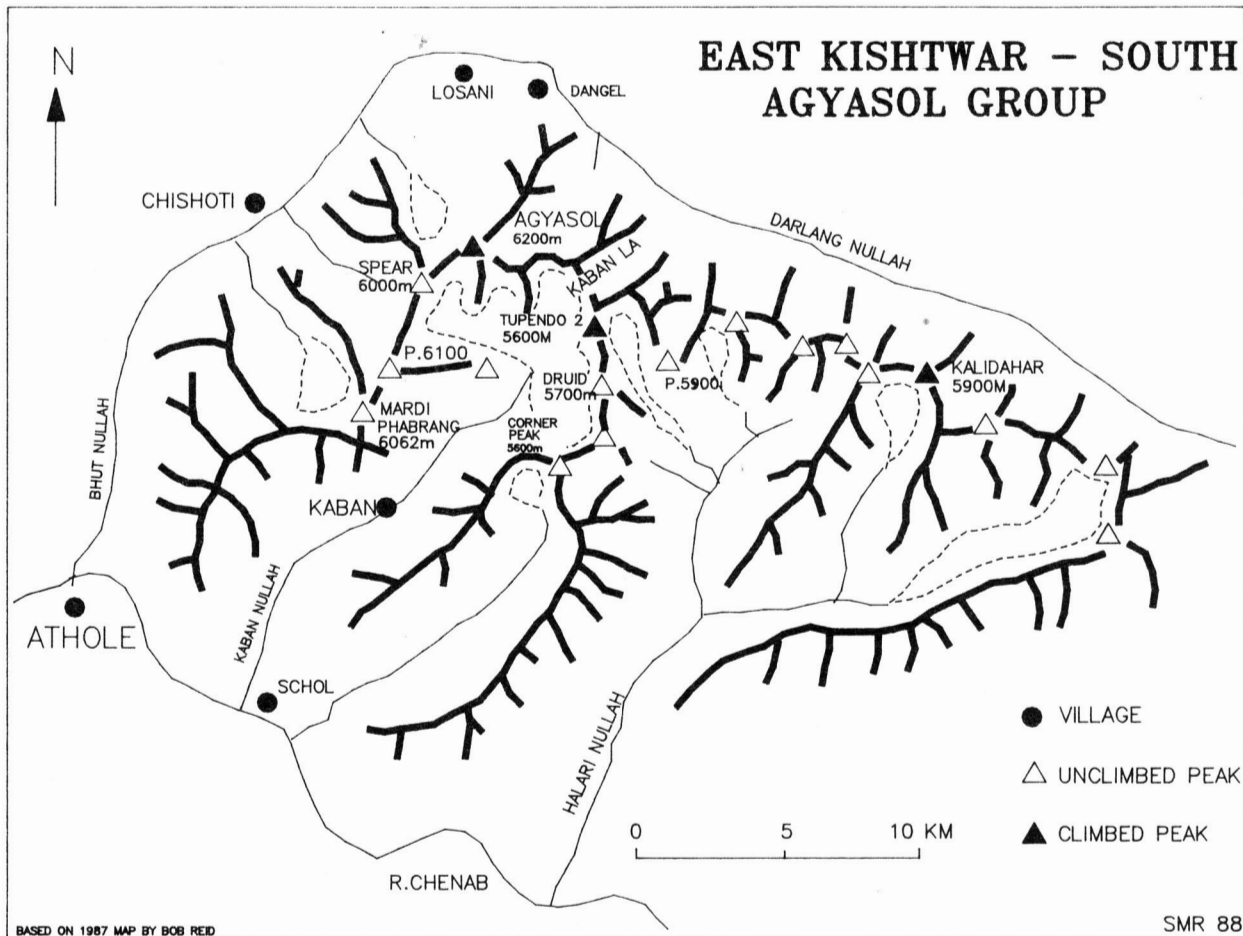
It was something of a shock, later that year, to discover that a party from Kingston Polytechnic had attempted Agyasol that autumn, but had failed to cross the Darlang river. (This still puzzles me, since there is a bridge at Losani, directly under the mountain. I can only surmise that they did not travel far enough up the valley to find it.) Showing remarkable determination, they then moved their Base Camp to the virtually unknown Kaban Nullah on the S side of the mountain, where they found an approach on to the E ridge. Running out of time, they retreated at 5600m below a prominent 300m-high rock buttress. This was an enormous contribution to the exploration of the area, and I wonder whether we would have found the mountain at all, let alone been able to climb it the following year, without their reconnaissance. We had managed to leave our maps back in Britain and, having reached Athole, we were guided to the Kaban Nullah by the many locals, who told us that the Kingston party had gone that way the year before. We were not quite as incompetent as this sounds, for the valleys in Kishtwar are deep and steeply sided, so that it is impossible to see the mountains at all until one reaches the higher villages such as Machail.

Agyasol is a large and complicated mountain but, once found, the E ridge proved to be an excellent route. We established ourselves fairly quickly at the Kingston highpoint below the rock buttress, but the weather turned bad that night and it stormed for the next three days. During a lull John, Mike and I (who was suffering badly from the altitude) descended, leaving Roger and Nick to sit out the storm for another two days. They climbed the rock buttress (which turned out to be not quite as fierce as it looked) in perfect weather, to a bivouac at its top, and continued along the long corniced ridges to the E summit the following day. They found it difficult to tell whether the central summit was any higher; reaching it would have involved many hundreds of metres of ascent and re-ascent along a sharp and exposed ridge, so they decided to descend.

John unfortunately had run out of time and returned home with Roger,

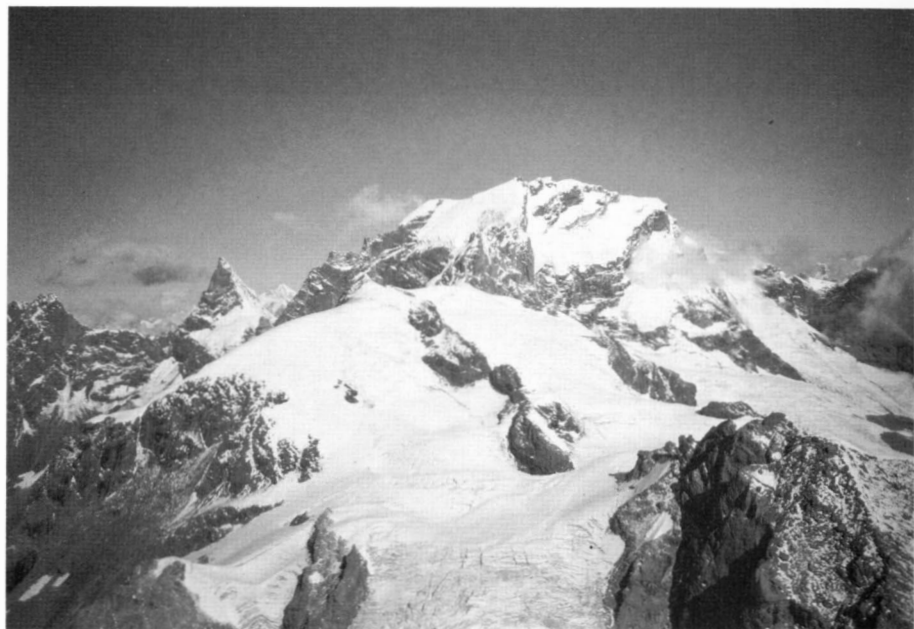


61. *Cerro Kishtwar from Chomochior W ridge. (p 63)*





21. Kalidahar Spire (5600m) L and Kalidahar Main Peak (5900m) R, from Dandagoporum Base Camp. (p 63)



22. Agyasol from summit of Tupendo 2. Rock buttress and E ridge in centre, Spear Peak to L. (p 63)

but Mike and I repeated the route after sitting out another five-day storm below the rock buttress. The weather in Kishtwar is variable, to say the least! After his first visit to Barnaj II in 1977, Paul Nunn described the weather as the worst he had encountered in 21 years' climbing, but other parties have experienced fine settled spells of up to two weeks. Most expeditions have climbed post-monsoon and have been well established on their mountains in early September, although the Japanese parties have tended to climb pre-monsoon. The Zanskar side of the range receives little precipitation, so it may be possible to climb on this side throughout the summer. However, any major weather system will affect the whole range, but the western and southern peaks appear to receive the bad weather first.

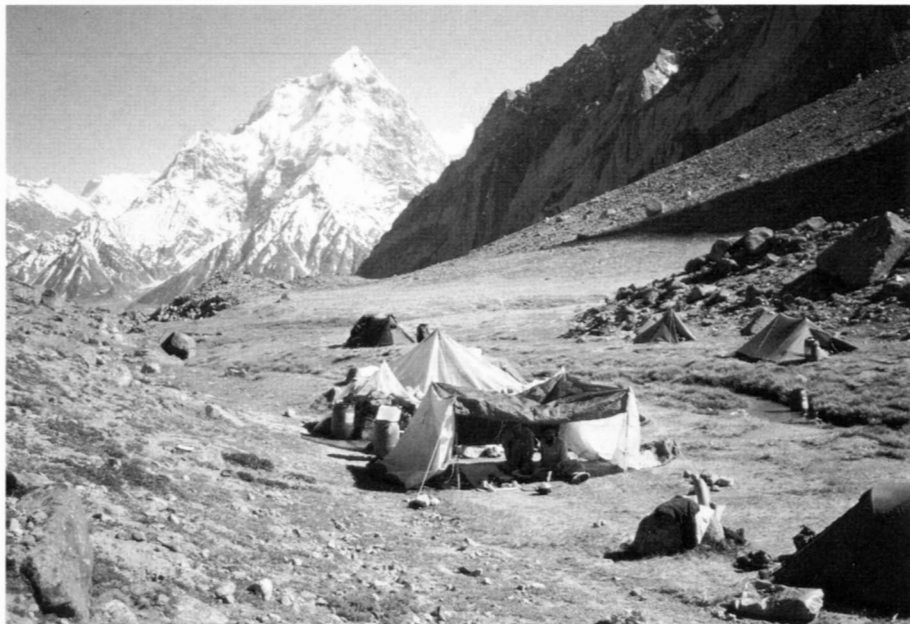
Mike and I reached the summit of Agyasol on a perfectly still clear day, and we had a superb view looking across to the mountains north of the Darlang Nullah. At that time they were virtually all unclimbed, but now many of the important peaks have had ascents. Almost directly opposite lay Kishtwar Shivling with its impressive S face. Steve Venables returned with Dick Renshaw in 1983 to climb the N face – a difficult seven-day climb up steep ice and rock. Together with the 1982 Polish routes on Arjuna (6230m), this is probably the most difficult climb, to date, in the range. Further to the east was a fine pyramidal peak which we called Kishtwar Weisshorn (6100m). It was climbed in 1986 by Bob Reid and Ed Farmer, who made a long and unseen approach directly up from the Darlang Nullah. Unacclimatized, they made a remarkably fast ascent of the icy SW face, taking only three days from the valley. Their liaison officer named their peak Dandagoporum – Hindi for 'Ivory Tower'.

Directly to the north, at the head of the Hagshu Nullah, lies Hagshu Peak (6300m). Steep on all sides, it is one of the most impressive mountains in the area. This peak was attempted several times from the Kishtwar side, until it was eventually climbed in 1988 with a northern approach from Zanskar via the Hagshu glacier. Chiring (6100m), just to the west across the Hagshu La (a difficult pass that is now only occasionally used), was almost climbed in 1980 by a British party, when Chris Lloyd fell from the summit ridge. They climbed a nearby peak (5638m), and named it Khagayu Dost (Hindi for 'Lost Friend') in memory of Lloyd. In 1987, after failing on the SW face of Hagshu, Andy Dunhill and Roger Brooks climbed the S ridge of Chiring to the S summit where they found an abseil sling. The Indian Mountaineering Foundation, however, was unaware that Chiring had been climbed, but had an ascent of Hagshu on its records. It is possible that a French party, who climbed a mountain they named La Shal (6135m) from the Hagshu Nullah in 1983, actually climbed Chiring, and that this was recorded by the IMF as an ascent of Hagshu.

It was the other peaks in the Agyasol group, however, which were to draw me back again in 1984. Before we went home in 1981, Nick and I spent a day and a half climbing a prominent *aiguille* above our Base Camp, which we called Spire Peak (5000m). It was really the first pinnacle on the long and complicated SE ridge of Mardi Phabrang (6062m), which is a very impressive mountain, and the most southerly of the Agyasol group. (This peak is marked as Gharol on many maps, but the local people from Kaban call a smaller rocky peak above their village Gharol. 'Gharol' was first climbed in 1980 by an Indian



23. *Chomochior from top bivouac on Kishtwar Shivling. The W ridge faces the camera L of the skyline. (p 63)*



24. *A better use of parapentes – Konyang Kish Base Camp. (p 76)*

team, but it is unclear which mountain they climbed.) The NE pillar of Mardi Phabrang was the objective of the 1984 expedition which consisted of Mark Miller, Sean Smith, Tom Curtiss and myself. In marginal weather we established a tent at the top of the long icy couloir that led to the col at 5200m, between the pillar and P6100m to the north. The weather never let up and conditions were always too icy to attempt the 200m rock buttress which led up to steep mixed ground and a beautiful narrow 'S'-shaped summit ice-field. After it had snowed every day for three weeks we gave up our attempt. Ironically, once we had descended to Base Camp the weather turned fine. We reacted to our disappointment in different ways. The rest of the team wanted to return to Delhi as quickly as possible, whilst I was keen to explore the peaks at the head of the valley, so, after packing a rucksack, I set off alone up the Kaban Nullah.

On entering this valley one finds that the higher mountains are hidden; the most striking peak is Tupendo I (5700m), a fine rock spire with some resemblance to the Dru. It is also worshipped as a god from Kaban, which is why John coined the name 'Druid' for it in 1981. To its left is Tupendo II (5600m), a straightforward snow peak (something of a rarity in Kishtwar); it seemed a sensible mountain for a solo attempt. I crossed the Agyasol glacier and bivouacked at 4600m by a rock rognon. Rising early next morning, I climbed the glacier to the col between the two mountains, and then climbed the broad S ridge to the summit. The weather was excellent, and I had plenty of time to study the surrounding peaks.

The Druid was not quite as steep in profile, and an interesting rock route could be climbed on the front (west) face. Corner Peak (5600m), at the south end of the Agyasol glacier, has a gully line cutting up through the NE face that leads on to the E ridge, which would make a good training climb. Behind me was P5900m, with a beautiful curling N ridge that would give reasonable climbing in a very impressive position overlooking the imposing Eiger-like NW face. It could either be approached from the col between the Druid and Tupendo II (which has an easy descent on the east side), or, in a more leisurely fashion, up the Halari Nullah from the Chenab river. This valley is unexplored and would also provide access to the Kalidahar group from the south. The main Agyasol group to the west provided an impressive backcloth of 6000m peaks, with Mardi Phabrang standing proud at the western end of the chain. I still believe that the NE pillar is the finest prize in the area. It was attempted again by a British party in 1986, but, arriving in the middle of September, they had a similar experience to ourselves and, suffering from poor weather, they were unable to make any significant progress on the route. Given good conditions it would make an ideal objective for a strong two-man team. The two mountains to its north, P6100m (which Mark christened 'Big Red Gnarley Peak') and Spire Peak (6000m) are both steep and impressive, but unfortunately consist of very poor rock. It may be possible to climb their icy N faces from the Bhut Nullah, but access would be difficult. A good view of P6100m can be had from just above the bridge at Chishote, halfway between Athole and Machail. (The rock varies in quality throughout the range. The rock buttress on Agyasol is gneiss, which was very friendly and provided lots of holds. Dandagoporum is mica schist, whilst Kishtwar Shivling consists of good rock akin to granite.) The

greatest mountaineering challenge in the group, however, is the traverse of the two Agyasol summits. This committing route would provide an exciting adventure for a strong team. The N face (which is similar in appearance to the Aiguille du Plan) can be reached from Dangel in the Darlang Nullah, and leads directly to the unclimbed central summit. Once the E summit is reached, the descent to Kaban and then Athole would take between two and three days.

It was a new experience to stand alone on an unclimbed summit, and it was tempting to stay longer, but I wanted to descend before the sun softened the snow. I retraced my footsteps to the Agyasol glacier, and then made the long haul to the site of the 1981 Agyasol Advanced Base at 4500m. I was intending to cross the Kaban La (a pass that is used frequently by shepherds in the summer) into the Darlang Nullah, and then, hopefully, to catch up with the others in Kishtwar. I started early next morning, and soon reached the glacier below the E ridge of Agyasol. On the north side it seemed remarkably snowy for a route supposed to be suitable for animals, but I put it down to the weeks of bad weather and continued on down. Several hours later, after I had gingerly picked my way through an extensive crevassed zone, the penny dropped, and I realized that I had missed the route. I should have traversed the slopes east from the ABC site to above a small glacier below the steep NW face of Tupendo II, which is cut by a superb gully that leads directly to the summit. I felt tired and, unsure of where exactly the Kaban La was, I was unwilling to retrace my steps in the knee-deep snow, and so I continued on down. It proved to be a big mistake. The crevasses became larger and I was forced to start abseiling, until suddenly I came out at the top of a huge vertical ice-wall. I sat down and thought. The easiest option was to abseil down the ice-wall and pray that two ice-screws were enough to reach the bottom. I set up the first abseil from an ice bollard, but after clipping my descendeur into the ropes, I couldn't bring myself to make the commitment. After a succession of bad decisions and poor judgements throughout the day, sense prevailed and I knew that I had to find another way. Eventually I summoned up enough energy to climb over a small rock peak, and then abseiled down a steep icy gully on its N side. When I ran out of gear, I downclimbed to reach another glacier system which led down into a tiny hanging valley. My worry now was whether it was possible to follow this down into the Darlang Nullah, but just as darkness fell I found a tiny deserted shepherd's shelter by a small pasture. Someone had been here before me! I was moved to tears. I reached Machail at 11am next morning, and just made Athole by nightfall. The following evening I caught up with the rest of the team in Kishtwar, and we all left for Jammu early next morning.

Roger Everett and I returned in autumn 1988 to climb Chomochior (6322m), at the head of the Haptal Nullah. Roger's account of our ascent is printed elsewhere in this volume (pp71-75). In contrast to my previous visits, the weather was poor on the summit, but we did get the occasional glimpse of the higher mountains. Agyasol, Sickle Moon, Barnaj and Hagshu dominated the skyline, while the nearer, shapely Dandagoporum just poked through the cloud. Across the Chomochior glacier to the east stood P6400m, a steep peak with no obvious route to the top. It is now the highest unclimbed summit in the range, and will be attempted by a Scottish party in autumn 1989. The nearest

peak, however, was Cerro Kishtwar (6200m), a daunting rock spire that would not have been out of place in Patagonia. We spent a long time studying the W face from our Advanced Base Camp on the upper Haptal glacier, before we eventually spotted a line up a narrow ice couloir that led up, through its seemingly blank upper walls, to reach the S ridge. From the summit ridge of Chomochior, however, we saw a perhaps more climbable route on its tremendous 2000m NE face. A steep line of icy gullies and grooves leads all the way to the summit. Other worthwhile objectives from the Haptal Nullah include several small rock peaks between Dandagoporum and Kishtwar Shivling, and the SE pillar of Shivling itself, which would provide a magnificent rock climb.

Carl Schaschke and Jeff Knight met us on our return to the valley. They had just made the first ascent, by a good ice and mixed route up the E ridge, of Kalidahar Main Peak (5900m), which lies across the Darlang Nullah from Dandagoporum. The rest of their party was attempting the impressive Kalidahar Spire (5600m). We learnt later that Conran Anker and Kevin Green climbed the N ridge by a superb 15-pitch climb (5.10 and A2), but Geoff Hornby and Tom Norris were less fortunate when they were defeated after 22 pitches by expanding flakes at half height on the larger NW face.

It had been fascinating to explore the cirque of mountains around the Haptal glacier, but one thing still puzzled us. Where exactly had Kolb gone when he crossed the elusive Muni La in 1947? My initial thought was that the icy col below P5900m, on the right fork of the Haptal glacier, must be the pass, but Roger was not convinced. He rather shrewdly guessed that Kolb must have taken the valley to the east of the Umasi Nullah. After all, he reasoned, the Umasi La led into Zanskar, and it seemed logical that Kolb should have tried a parallel valley. From Chomochior we had noticed a sharp notch in the rock wall on the west side of the huge glacier basin below the N face. Was this Kolb's Muni La? After a day's rest at Base Camp it was time to put the theory into practice, so we packed four days' food and set off to repeat Kolb's journey. We were tired, and it took us two days to reach the tiny glacier at the head of the valley – a journey which must have taken Kolb half a day or so if he was to keep to his demanding three-day schedule. Unfortunately the weather closed in for the next two days, so we never crossed the notch, but it did look reasonable from its eastern side and we were certain that we had found the Muni La. Kolb's journey remains unrepeatable, and is an excellent example of the exploratory trekking the area has to offer.

Twelve years after the ascent of the first peak, most of the higher summits have been climbed at least once, but often only by the most obvious route. There is plenty of scope left to satisfy those looking for a technical challenge with a hint of the unknown.