



PARAGLIDING IN KARAKORAM



Summary

[John Silverster, the precursor](#)

[Crossing the Chatri La](#)

[Postscript](#)

[A trip in Hindu Kuch](#)

[May 2004, Babaghundi in the Chapursan Valley](#)

[September 4th 2005, Gilgit-Baghulti, 120 kms](#)

[September 5th, Baghulti](#)

[September 6th, Baghulti-Minagan, 80 kms](#)

[September 7th to 13th, Mastuj](#)

[September 14th, Mastuj-Theru, 60 kms](#)

[September 15th, Theru-Ishkommen, 120 kms](#)

[September 16, Ishkommen-Zutron \(Chapursan\), 70 kms](#)



To fly like a bird... an old dream as humanity, since the invention of delta-plane then paraglider, it became reality. If you still have doubts, then read the following text rather...

The free flight was invented thirty years ago. The first wings then made it possible just to go down from the mountains. But their performances never ceased progressing, and it is today possible to flying up with ascents (related to the wind and the heating of the sun), and to fly hours and hours or to traverse a few hundred kilometers in only one flight (it is what is called the cross or distance flight).

Then traveling while flying, mountains range to mountains range, by landing in the evening where we begin to fly the next morning, is the ultimate search of the free flight. It is what is called the bivouac flight which is finally a very long air excursion and in total autonomy with for single engine, the wind and the sun... and legs when precisely the wind is too strong to fly.

The flight bivouac knew its cantor and prophet : Didier Favre. With its delta wings, it had thus slowly been metamorphosed in a true vagrant of the airs, and each year, (in years 80-90), he flight the through the integral alpine range (read its book " le vagabond des airs ", Actes Sud). With paragliders, the practice of the bivouac flight was simplified considerably, and is not reserved field to except specimens; a parapente is indeed much lighter to carry, folded, it take place in a simple bagback. Add necessaryies for bivouac, clothes and food for a few days...

and the live the adventure, therefore far where the wind carries you ! But as marvellous as this way of travelling, few finally practise it. Because this kind of flight remains very demanding as well as physically and mentally.



**From feft to right : John Silverster,
pakistani friend, Julien Wirtz, Gildas
Moussali & Philippe Nodet**

And if there is somewhere where the the bivouac flight adventure is led to its paroxysm, it would be without any doubt the fabulous Himalayas and Karakoram ranges. Gigantic mountains, incredible aerology, maximum liability, but with the privilege to fly in some places without maps. The bivouac flight in these high mountains is connected with exploratory flight. The Englishman John Silverster, great climber reconverted in paragliding was first dared to defy Karakoram, revealing at the same time the incredible potential of exploratory flight in this area. In France, Philippe Nodet, Julien Wirtz and Gildas Moussali made since their favorite play-ground in Karakoram area.

The bivouac flight in Karakoram, it's extreme paragliding practice at sometimes more than 7000 meters hight by -15°C in mountainous areas with an incredible meteorology. We are lucky today to live these adventures through the stories of John and Philippe, their stories are incredible and full of passion. Your attention please, the reading of these web pages can take along you towards skies certainly sumptuous but in an empty oxygen and icy. On the other hand, environment is full of contagious passion !



John Silverster, the precursor :



**Bubulimating : John rase les
"3 lady's fingers" !
(1,47 mns / 8 Mo)**

John is the first very strong pilot who dared to try the flight in Karakoram with his paraglider, almost on very committed routes. John Sylverster tells how he tried paragliding and why he whirl around the Karakoram mountains. Here its wonderfull story (translated from a text written by John Silverster by Blankonthemap):

In the 1980's, I wasn't a flyer. but a climber, and 1988 saw me in the Karakorum Himalayas, attempting the big wall of Bublomotin, a 6000m rock tower in the Hunza valley,

Pakistan. I had seen it for the first time the year earlier, and tried to climb it alpine style, just 2 of us moving fast with a single rope and the minimum of gear. But the effects of altitude defeated us, so we made plans to come back the following year as a big team, with lots of gear, portaledges... and paragliders, with which we planned to fly from the ridiculously small summit.

None of us had used a paraglider before, so we spent the 2 months prior to the expedition teaching ourselves to fly. It was such good fun that we seemed to do nothing else, and certainly didn't go climbing, what with an expedition to organise and a mountain of gear to sort out. And then, naturally, the obvious thing happened. We failed to climb our mountain. Again! But I did manage to remember something about the unique weather patterns that existed in that valley, conditions that would allow me 13 years later to look down on the summit of Bublomotin, from a paraglider.



Crossing the Chatri La :

I leave the climb at 7200m, heading towards the white glider miles out in front of me thats coming up fast from the depths of the valley, and for once I wish I wasn't so high. I envy Eddie, in his bubble of warm air, because up here at 7000m, the air is cold, numbingly cold, so cold that I lean back as far as possible in my supine harness, hoping to prevent the frozen air from reaching my face. I work my fingers mechanically inside layered gloves, and when some feeling returns, I pull off the clumsy outer ones, and pull open the back of the camera, stuffing the used film inside my fleece. Then, pulling out a tail from the new film, I am just about to slot it into my new camera when I hit violent air, and grab for the brake handles. The camera thrashes wildely about my harness, its open back flailing like a broken limb, whilst my fingers

relentlessly begin to freeze, hindering the major operation I am now involved in...and the new film I have placed in my mouth begins to freeze to my lips.

We had naively thought hypoxia was going to be the problem, but it's not ...it's the COLD. As I join Eddie's thermal, I feel sickened by the strong lift I immediately encounter because I'm still too high and I want down, to warmer air and sanity. So I leapfrog his climb and keep going, almost chanting the magical number of 5500m, where the air is warmer and recovery can happen. I reach the big ice face of Rakaposhi with plenty of height, but get weak climbs coming up the ice, so that Eddie's glide comes in above me, and he has to wait whilst I climb up past the huge seracs guarding the upper snowfields. Then my vario goes ballistic and we are together, one white and one yellow paraglider, in the sky of the gods. They are all around us, 7788m Rakaposhi, 7200m Diran, 7400m Bojohagur and 7400m Ultar, and some of them with only a single ascent. Yet we, with our flimsy flying machines can visit them on a whim. Totally unreal...madness.



Au dessus du Hunza Peak
(6200m)
(1,28 mns / 6,6 Mo)

Then the peace is broken by the radio...Eddie's PTT is malfunctioning again, probably due to the intense cold. For a few minutes I endure the noise, futilely hoping it will go away, but eventually giving in to the inevitable, I laboriously reach down into the back of my harness to turn the thing off. Silence...but another day without radios. I stare at the chain of mountains out in front, a line-up of the biggest mothers in the world. It starts with Rakaposhi, with a connecting headwall to Diran, followed 20 km further by Spantik, with its golden pillar glowing in the intense sunlight...and then after 150km and countless more summits, there is K2 and Broad Peak visible in the distance. Looking at them through a flyer's eyes is just amazing, a 150km 'ridge' of snow-covered mountains, with only one sign of weakness, the 100km long river of ice flowing out of snow lake, which at 5000m is the lowest point on the ridge. Some weakness!!

Back home in Britain, looking at maps around bar room tables, a Snow Lake crossing had seemed feasible. But not here, at 7500m, hanging under a paraglider, and looking at the real thing! Now, it just seemed crazy. Once again, the Himalayas had proved themselves to be bigger than man's imagination, and as usual, I had totally under-estimated things. I had no climbing equipment with me, not even an ice axe... and the stupidly high cloud base of 7600m meant that we were bound to be hypoxic, and cold. But this high cloud base also opened up undreamed of new possibilities...like crossing the headwall between Rakaposhi and Diran. ! Looking at the map which was conscientiously strapped to my leg, this low point, this col, was 'only' 5500m...but it was also a 15km glide away, over snow and ice!!! With today's tail wind, and gliding from 7500, surely this was possible? My hypoxic brain was inclined to think so.



**Près du rakaposhi, à l'approche du
Chatri La
(2,57 mns / 13,3 Mo)**

Eddie and I joined up in a climb, wing tip to wing tip, and he shouted across to me that he was heading back to the 'home' valley, frustrated by his radio and the strong upper wind. As he headed back towards the comfort of our brown desicated valley, I continued to climb in the thin cold air, drifting out over the ice of the Minapin glacier, and trying to calculate if the glide over the high col would work. Today did seem like the perfect day, but I couldn't make a

decision. Reaching the developing cloud, flying out into the wisps, things suddenly became easy as intuition or hypoxic summit fever took over. I turned my wing to face the snowy summits, and started a long long glide.

Tucked into my harness, getting as low as possible, I watched the amazing mountain wall get imperceptibly bigger until finally it filled the whole horizon. Now there was nothing but white, both below and beyond me, a monochrome broken only at the col by a bright cobalt sky. And that is where I looked, fanatically, where white met blue, trying to judge the angle of the glide. My whole being was focused on the col, which remained static on the horizon as I glided on in the good (2m/sec down.) air. I was thankful for such good air, but the glide was so marginal that I worried about the sink getting worse, in which case I had no chance of crossing the col, and would be forced to make a glacier landing.

And if I did make it, what would be on the otherside? Undoubtedly a glacier...but how long? As I glided closer, the air got better, with only 1m/sec down, and eventually a long straight glacier came into sight on the other side of the range. It was still looking uncertain, but I started to sit up in my harness to take photo's. And then a bend in the far glacier came into view, and I knew that I would make it, relaxing into this amazing situation, marveling at the unique snow fluting and bergshrunds on the face below. I eventually crossing the Chatri La with maybe 200m clearance, and glided off down the next glacier for a further 15 km, crossing its snout with 1000m to spare.

And then I was shocked to see trees, huge pines lining the sides of the valley, and I flew the lift for a further 30km to get back to civilisation, and even a tarmaced road. . We hadn't seen such trees for the month we had been flying on the north side of the range, and now, here on the south side, the air coming up from the Indian plain was just moist enough to give a little occasional rain. I had crossed the Karakorum!

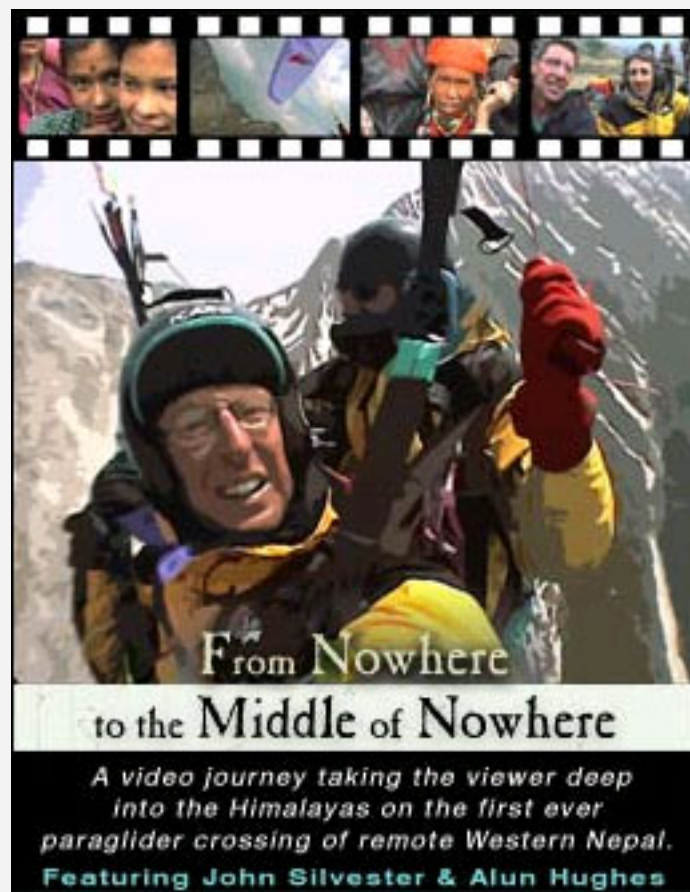


Postscript :

The Chatri La isn't marked as such on any map, just a spot height of 5315 between the Minapin and Hinarche glaciers, the low point of the headwall. It isn't the sort of col anyone but the most accomplished himalayan mountaineer would consider... so has probably never been crossed... we couldn't find a name for it, so it became the Chatri La... the local Hunza people's name for us, ' the umbrella men'!

This is really only a beginning... a flight over the narrowest part of the range that was almost only an extended glide. With the knowledge that such glides over ice may be so good, the karakorum looks like the ultimate aerial playground, challenging pilots with it's plethora of routes waiting to be opened.

John's Web Site :



A trip in Hindou Kuch :



Philippe Nodet have been in North Pakistan in 2004 and 2005 with his paraglider. He's one of the great specialist and share here his experience of paraglider in high mountains of Karakoram :

I have practiced the paraglider for 16 years, intensely, passionately. An obsession : the bivouac flight; It is art way to travelling with paraglider, from climbs to climbs. In the evening,

we are arriving where we begin to fly the next morning, and if the aerological conditions are not favorable for the flight, one has the choice between walk (flight equipment, for bivouac, clothes and food do not exceed 25 kg) or meditation.

I traced my way through the Pyrenees, Alps, Moroccan Atlas, Tians shans range (Kirghisie) in the two-seater with my wife in the Himalayas (From Dharamsala to the Nepal border, that is to

say 500kms in ten days).

The magic of the flight bivouac is to fly in space, of course, but perhaps more still in the meetings people; From the sky, we are meeting people with open arms, sometimes with people who had never seen tourists! Then it is not rare that they clap their hands, by thanking us passionately. I have two famous adventures companions, Gildas Moussali (who's yet a sailor) and Julien Wirtz (also paraglider monitor in Prével). When we fly together, we are not joined by a rope but we are connected only by radio. We discovered mountains of Karakoram together, the most beautiful mountains of the earth, capped with an incredible aerology. In the Karakoram, it is not rare to climb almost 4000 meters in less than half hour, with the only power of thermics! We can fly at nearly 7000 meters, traveling 100 km in a day, on routes opened by famous Shipton, Tilman and Thesiger... in some long days walk !

Then we lived beautiful adventures, even more beautiful are waiting us next months. The air exploration of North Pakistan is not finished as Shipton wrote in "beyond this mountain": "There is so much to discover for explorers, in these mountains ranges, as once in the game, it seems that it should never finish". We are damned !



May 2004, Babaghundi in the Chapursan Valley :

No chances to fly over the Chilingi pass this time. Day after day, the down wind has been blowing hard. We don't even know where it is coming from as the sky is clear and there is no cloud drifting with the wind. Could we try on foot? That would be madness. The pass is above 5000m on a glacier with plenty of crevasses and with our bags weighing 25 kilos each, it would take us a week to reach the first trail!

After 10 days of bivvy flying, we are stuck in this high valley at 3000m., between Afghanistan and China. In this remote part of the world, Alam Jam Dario, a large blond guy who looks like a soldier of Alexander the Great, has welcomed us home and has proved to be a poet, musician and mountain guide. He would not



have dared dreaming about such a trip, a cross-country flying adventure that led us to him.

It is true that we are coming from far. At the beginning, we were thinking of going all the way round the Batura range, setting off from Gilgit. We flew from Gilgit to Karimabad and leaving the large Hunza valley, we went deep in the heart of the Karakorum thanks to cloudbases at 6500 meters. We reached in two hops the village of Shimshal then the Chinese border of the Khunjerab pass. We had packed in our harness 10 days of food, a rope, an axe and some crampons. In case of...

During our flight between Shimshal and the Khunjerab pass, my two companions had to land at a height of 4500 m on a glacial moraine while I was continuing alone in the direction of the

Chinese border. For them, it turned out to be an exhausting three days trek, without any track, down the Gugerhat valley before being able to return to civilization. They even had to use their glider but only to cross a river in flood.

Thankfully, we all met in Sost for a last flight which brought us to this village, below the Chilingi pass defending access to the Karambar valley which leads to Gilgit. We have been waiting for 5 days but the pass remains unreachable due to an annoying rear wind defeating us. Therefore we leave by where we came but by foot, on horse and in jeep until the first road. Inch' Allah, we'll be back...



View far to chapursan valley



September 4th 2005, Gilgit-Baghulti, 120 kms :



**Flying over an unknown
summit**

Deep blue sky and haze down in the valley. Is it the best conditions to start a cross-country flight? Julien and I are asking ourselves before taking off for another month of adventure. We are planning this time a bivouac circuit from Gilgit to Chitral, through the Karakorum and Indu Kuch. A trip of just above 500 kms involving the crossing of several passes at more than 5000. That is why we have deliberately chosen September, between monsoon and autumn, when there should be less snow at high altitude. Remember that if the weather conditions are not suitable, we will have to cross on foot. Bad news. It is too stable and we are struggling to get any height. We took off at 2500 meters and we have to fight for an hour to reach 4000 meters, the minimum altitude needed to leave Gilgit. Once pressing hold on the first edges, the thermals are getting stronger and stronger and here we are after a few turns at 6000m. Time to start our

trip!

Not so easy to fly at 6000 meters, just three days after suffocating in the moist air of Rawalpindi. I am trying not to go too high, to fly fast and to stay close to the ridges on this highway to cloudbase. When we studied the maps, it seemed obvious to follow the valley of the Gilgit river up to the Indu Raj range. And it works. We fly above amazing diverse landscapes: glaciers, rocky deserts, lava flow and suddenly, hiding behind a ridge, a huge sand dune at 5000m of altitude! We land in the shadow of the massive Dhulis Shish mountain (6500m), in the Darkot valley, just at the foot of the Indu Raj range. Here start the real troubles...

Upon our arrival, we are greeted by a lively crowd and are taken to the best house in the village. The locals treat us like kings and offer us food and shelter, just what we need to forget our weariness after breathing rarefied air for hours. But, as it is time to sleep, we are requested to answer urgently the only phone working in the village. On the other end of the phone, an overexcited policeman who saw us 20 kms ago firing questions at us :

- *"Where do you come from?*
- *Gilgit, in 5 hours of flying!*
- *What? But it is unbelievable!*
- *Why didn't you land at the last checkpoint?*
- *But we are not talibans, just flying frenchies!*
- *(Laughing) And tomorrow, where are you going?*

- Mastuj.
- !!! You must be joking! (Now roaring with laughter) You want to cross the Indu Raj!? It is too high! You're mad!

And that is how you get nightmares. It is completely crazy to fly over Indu Raj. Everyone says so...



Far west landscape on the same route

September 5th, Baghulti :



Duli chhish form sky at 6500m high

Difficult to wake up. First comes the headache then the pains and finally the stomach loosens. Today, I will not fly. Unluckily or luckily, Julien is in the same state. We will therefore spend the day between our sleeping bag and the toilets. Hopefully, our hosts are looking after us. Unlike years ago, during the Great War, when around this place they used to kill British spies for attempting to draw maps of this terra incognita.

Now reading our Russian maps, we can measure the challenge of our project. To cross on foot the Indu Raj range, there is a single pass at 5100m., fully North facing and mostly icy. It should take one week walking and it is not really good to fly. If we want to cross the range by paraglider, we will have to aim straight into the wall at more than 6000m and try to find one weak point in it to topple over the other side. If we fail, we will need to walk for days and days to return to our starting point... And that is how you prepare yourself for a second night of nightmares!

September 6th, Baghulti-Minagan, 80 kms :

Blue sky and some traces of mist which indicates stability in the depths of the valley. We're back in shape though shaky now that it is time for us to fulfil our dreams. We leave our friends with regret, walk painfully 1000m uphill on steep slopes and take off once the breeze settles. No hint of instability in this too blue sky. We're becoming doubtful. Then suddenly our vario starts screaming:

+3, +5 then more than 10 m/s. Twenty minutes later, we are hardly breathing 3500 meters higher, above Duli Shish. Just before taking off, we had quickly swallowed plenty of medicines to avoid the negative effects of altitude so here we are burping their unpleasant smell as we are gliding frozen at 6000 m towards the incredible wall of Chikari. Our two Vallunas are thrown into extraordinary turbulence: they twist and rear like hell but don't collapse and take us willy-nilly to the door of our dreams. Last cloudbase and while holding my breath, I cross first the Chikari range with an eagle by my side, somewhere up at 6000m.



Hindou Rag traverse, Chikari North face

- *"Wow! Top class!"*

We are going wild and shouting our happiness at the radio. We've done it! We've crossed the Indu Raj range! We now just have to glide along the glacial north faces, still unclimbed territories. Two hours later, we land a few kilometres away from Mastuj. Then come the usual greetings: a restless crowd, the best house in the village, loads of questions (but this time in another language), the fine dishes... and the suspicious looks of the policemen in charge of the border surveillance.



September 7th to 13th, Mastuj :



Le parapente over shoolboys

Don't even dare to think that the weather is always that good in the kingdom of Karakorum. It is normally the opposite. So, after reaching Mastuj on foot, we are grounded in this dreary small town for a whole week. The west wind has brought with it his usual succession of violent storms and just would not stop.

The village is quite depressing. People are barely smiling though they are lucky enough to be connected by a track to the world and benefit from

a few of the modern conveniences. But according to the local schoolteacher, this is exactly the reason why they now want to have more than the little they have. As we arrived less visible on foot and we have to wait, we manage to build some more modest and true relations with the inhabitants. We get to discover each other, humbly and step by step. We become friends with the teacher, Abou Beker, and do a few demo flights at his school. Thanks to him, the waiting is less dull and hard to bear even if we are getting more and more worried as the snow is falling lower and lower on the mountains. It certainly looks like autumn is catching up with us and we fear to lose the race.



September 14th, Mastuj-Theru, 60 kms :

The wind is still blowing from the west but has weakened. We have to fly today. Instead of setting off towards Chitral, we decide to head tailwind to Gilgit through the Shangur Pass. But first we need to find where to launch. All around us, there are only extremely steep scree-covered slopes. The only possible side is not well orientated, just under the wind of the Buni Zom range facing it. This is going to be a particularly rough flight and we hang on tight as we progress in the strong thermals cut by the wind. At last, we manage to get to Shangur Pass, a vast grassy plateau but which crossing makes us lose all our height reserve.



After Shandur pass traverse, Ghizer valley, right bank at 6500m high

Fortunately, we are able to catch some thermals very low and in a few minutes. We are back at cloudbase but this time with the wind behind us... when a raging eagle starts attacking Julien's wing! Only after a long session of engaged wingovers and 360°, will the predator abandon. Really no fun and a tiring exercise when you fly above 6000m ! By the way, cloudbase continues to rise and we are at 6500m when we fly over a mountain range which is tersely mentioned on our maps as "information glacial limited". Our adventure is well under way and we have recovered the advantage over the autumn. All is fine.



September 15th, Theru-Ishkommen, 120 kms :



Karambar valley at 7000m high

Cumuli are pushed by again a strong west wind. The autumn is on our heels but our goal is within range. One long straight line still before Gilgit. The good thing about flying above 6000 meters is that the performance of our small wings is largely increased. At trim speed, our Vallunas fly at 50 km/h! That day, with a tailwind of 30 km/h, we are taken in a kind of gasping sprint, pushed by a cloud front and a snow screen!

Once we reach the confluence between the valleys of the Gilgit river and Karambar, we meet the route we took on our way to here but instead of taking it and finishing wisely at Gilgit by a flying trail known to us, we decide to go further within the Karambar, next to the Batura range. A suicidal choice while considering the evolution of the weather conditions over the last days... but we are less than 50 kms away from the Chilingi pass and we start dreaming of the impossible. We land in the Ishkommen village, after 120 kms of wild ridges covered in just above three hours!

Again one nice evening with our hosts of the day. We answer all their questions and eat all the dishes specially made for us but our thoughts are focused on only one thing. Where will we be tomorrow evening? Will we be in the arms of Alam Jam? If so, that means flying at 7000m. ! Or will we be somewhere in the heights of Karambar, before a long painful journey? What did we let ourselves into? Why did we go for such a stupid idea? Another night of doubts in perspective...



September 16, Ishkommen-Zutron (Chapursan), 70 kms :

A perfect take-off, in a coomb facing the breeze. A perfect sky with small cumuli above 7000m. And great surroundings of impressive slopes and glaciers, like the famous Batura wall with its 30 km of ridges over 7000m. This is ideal scenery for our rendez-vous with the dream we had more than a year ago... and we did it!

First, the conditions are huge and we find ourselves at cloudbase in only a few minutes. Our brains full of blood don't bother us too much this time but our altimeters show an unbelievable 6900

meters on their screen! Moreover, today's friendly wind pushes us exactly in the direction we want to go and we are speeding at 80 km/h on our GPS towards the Khoz Sahr ridge and the Chilingi we need to cross.

The view is really stunning. We are exactly vertical to the confluence of three of the most awesome mountain ranges in the World: Karakorum, Indu Kuch and Pamir. While I am thermalling close to Julien, it suddenly dawns on me that I am at the zenith of my passion for adventure. It is the most beautiful flight of our life.

After a last altitude gain above Khoz Sahr (6800m), we move to a Tolkienesque landscape, a huge palace of ice with spectacular entrenched dizzy walls. Nice transition without encountering a problem and we are now sliding endlessly along the Yacund glacier, already seeing in the distance the red mountains of the Chapursan valley. We succeeded in crossing the Batura range! Emotions are at their peak level, like the scenery but also like our tiredness. I don't register that my ground speed is increasing, as I get closer to the bottom of the valley.

A strong katabatic flow rushes down this huge glacial mass. Oh that was it! We had to give up last year just underneath the pass because of it. But I only realise it once I recover consciousness after crashing hardly on a pebble bed at full speed with rear wind. I've seen million of stars but all full of joy!

It has only taken us two hours flying to reach Chapursan. The only other possible route takes ten days on foot with a guide and it is compulsory to obtain a special authorisation. Fallen from the sky, the first human we are meeting is unfortunately a policeman. But luckily he stops bothering us after a while. Our happiness seems to be contagious. He watches us leave



Julien portrait , up of Koz Sar summit, at 7000m, during Batura range traverse



stunned, exhausted by all the efforts and tension gathered but with a huge grin on our faces. Then we are going to knock on the door of our friend, Alam Jan.



Alam Jan, our friend

To the same topics :



Révision A-18/03/06 (<http://blankonthemap.free.fr>)

[Home](#) - [History](#) - [Geography](#) - [local life](#) - [Travelling](#) - [Index](#) - [Gallery](#) - [Links](#) - [About
Blank](#)

For more details, contact the [Webmaster](#).

