



Elusive Summits: Four expeditions in the Karakoram

Victor Saunders

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Elusive Summits is the award winning first book by British mountaineer Victor Saunders, winner of the 1990 Boardman Tasker Prize for Mountain Literature. Documenting climbs in the 1980s, at a time when the greatest mountains in the greatest ranges had been climbed by numerous routes, collected like sets of stamps and written about extensively by the world's leading climbers, Saunders and his companions relished the exploration of the thousands of peaks in the 6000 and 7000 metre range. These slightly humbler, but often more aesthetically satisfying and no less testing summits of the Karakoram and the Himalaya, were ripe fruit for the committed alpinists of the day. Saunders describes four lightweight expeditions to the Karakoram, beginning with Uzum Brakk, or Conway's Ogre, which he visited in 1980. Along with his two climbing companions, neither of whom he knew at all well, he discovered the serious nature of Karakoram glaciers, and faced up to the violent weather that eventually beat them back on the summit ridge after they had nominally completed their route. The trio interrupted their attempt on Uzum to perform a dramatic rescue of two badly injured Japanese climbers on nearby Latok IV, and this contact led indirectly to Bojohaghur Duanasir, one of the highest unclimbed mountains in Pakistan, which became the object of the North London Mountaineering Club's attentions in 1982. Here, in the company of such friends and climbing partners as Mick Fowler, the joy of new route finding on an unclimbed 7000-metre peak outweighed the perilous bivouacs and torture by lightning. 1983 offered a rare chance to join Indian climbers on the front line of the Indian-Pakistan border conflict across the Siachen Glacier. The pleasure of solving intricate technical problems with Stephen Venables high above the firing line was brought to an abrupt end by a dropped rucksack which caused an epic descent from just below the then unclimbed summit of Rimo. The fourth expedition was an attempt on the stunning peak of Spantik. First glimpsed from Bojohaghur, this a mountain whose awe-inspiring Golden Pillar, soaring 4000 feet to the summit ridge, demanded attention. Saunders' ascent in 1987 with Mick Fowler, and subsequent pitch-by-grunt account, proved to be one of the most exciting and difficult ascents of the decade by British alpinists. Saunders communicates the highs and lows of expedition life with relish, good humour, honest trepidation and a keen eye for the idiosyncratic among his companions. Elusive Summits is a wonderful celebration of the sheer exhilaration that comes from the hardest level of alpine-style exploration in the Karakoram.

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