

## 2011 Indo-American Saser Kangri II Expedition



Photo, Mark Richey

### The Climb

“American Alpine Club President Steve Swenson, past club President Mark Richey, and Mountain Hardwear athlete Freddie Wilkinson have made the first ascent of Saser Kangri II, the second-highest unclimbed mountain in the world, 7,518 meters (24,665 ft.). The team began their ascent from an advance base camp at 5,800 meters on the South Shukpa Glacier on August 21st, summited on August 24th, and returned to ABC the next day, August 25th. Their five-day, continuous-push ascent and descent of the mountain's Southwest Face, without pre-established camps or fixed ropes, is one of history's highest first ascents to be accomplished in alpine style.” Freddie Wilkinson.



Photo, Mark Richey

This photo is taken from our high point during my 2009 attempt on Saser Kangri II with Mark Wilford, Jim Lowther, and Steve Swenson. Although bad weather forced us down from only halfway up the face, the knowledge we gained during that expedition was critical to our success in 2011.



Swenson leading on day 2 in the Great Couloir on Saser Kangri II

Photo, Freddie Wilkinson



Richey leading through the Ice Chimney on day 2, Saser Kangri II

Photo, Steve Swenson



Camp 2... just barely, at ca 6,700 m on SKII

Photo, Freddie Wilkinson

Note the blue nylon “Ice Hammocks” we used to shore up ice and snow and create a ledge just big enough for our tiny tent. Other than at Camp 1, which was quite low on the face, we found no ledges on the rest of the wall big enough for the tent. The 2 oz. Ice Hammocks custom made for us by Wild Things proved invaluable in preparing for our camps.



Photo, Steve Swenson

Wilkinson powers through the “Escape Hatch” on day 3, a key passage that unlocked the upper section of the climb and led to easier summit ice fields and the summit ridge.



Photo, Freddie Wilkinson

On the final summit ridge of Saser Kangri II. Note the triangular peak just left of the lower climber is Tsok Kangri which we had made the first ascent of earlier in the expedition. The big glacier to the right is the South Shukpa Kunchang where we had our advance base camp. We were the first climbers to ever explore these glaciers.



Photo, Freddie Wilkinson

Mark Richey, Steve Swenson, and Freddie Wilkinson, summit of Saser Kangri II, August 24th, 2011

### **Drama at the end!**

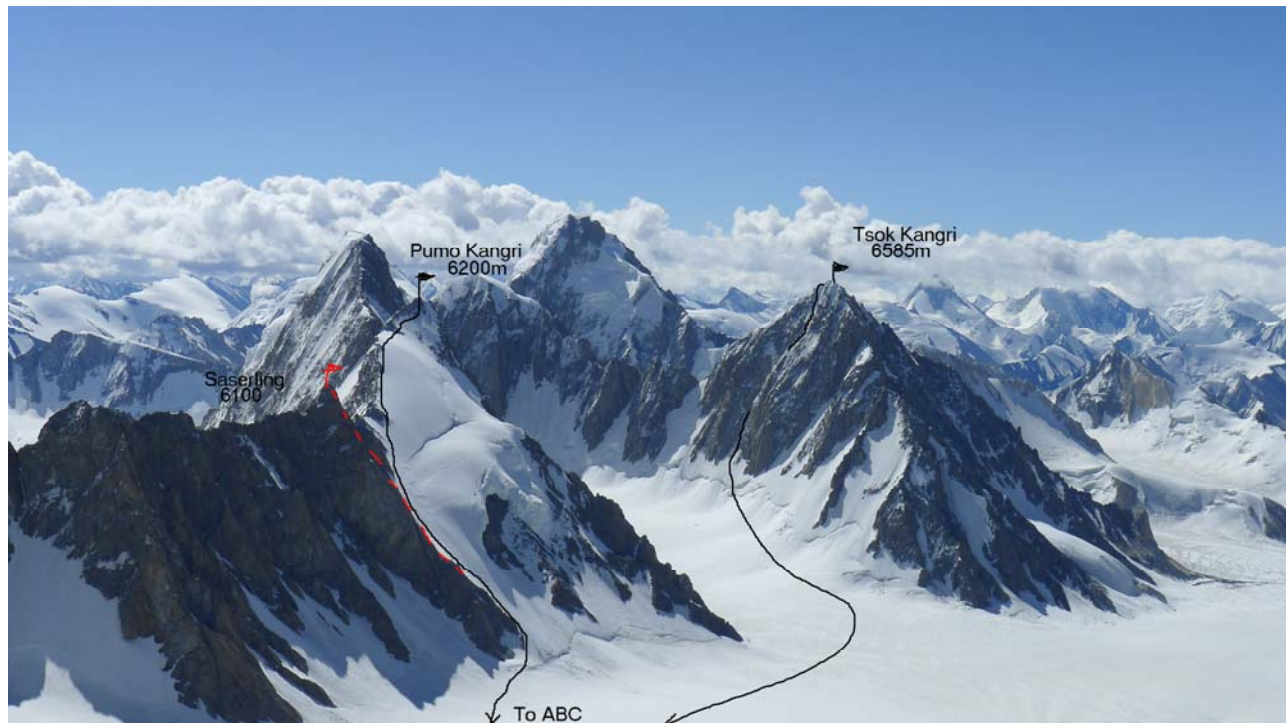
Although the technical difficulties on the 1,700 meter face went smoothly, the team confronted an unexpected medical emergency when a sinus infection suffered by Swenson worsened into a serious respiratory problem just after reaching ABC. Steve's condition was serious as he coughed up large, glue-like clumps of phlegm that would block his airway periodically, preventing him from breathing. We all feared for his life. Using our SAT phone we initiated a rescue effort through Global Rescue, the American Alpine Club, the American Embassy in Delhi, and Rimo Expeditions. In addition, my wife Teresa had just arrived in Leh and spent the entire day on the phone tirelessly urging the State Department, the Embassy, and everyone involved to cut through red tape and approve clearance for the Lama helicopters. The Indian Air Force alone has helicopters capable of landing and taking off at high altitudes. Without Teresa's persistence we are sure we would have waited another full day for the chopper and that may have proved fatal for Steve. Finally at around 4 p.m., as worsening weather threatened to cancel the rescue, clouds lifted and two Lama Helicopters, flying low over the mountains, appeared above the South Shukpa Glacier. We heard the rotors first as we had taken shelter inside the tents. I remember waking an exhausted Swenson and announcing "your Limo is here!" Swenson was evacuated from ABC on August 26th to a hospital in Leh where he recovered quickly in a few days. Richey and Wilkinson remained on the glacier and cleared off our camp with our Sherpa staff, rejoining Swenson in Leh on August 30th.

### **"Hidden Jewel"**

Despite the scare, the team is ecstatic about the quality of our adventure. "Saser Kangri II is a real hidden jewel of the Himalaya," says Wilkinson. "There aren't many unclimbed 7,000 plus meter peaks left anymore, and to make SKII's first ascent, climbing unsupported in alpine-style, is a once-in-a-career opportunity. I'm thankful to my partners Mark and Steve for sharing their Himalayan expertise. This kind of exploratory alpine adventure is sadly becoming a thing of the past."

### **Other First Ascents**

Additionally, the team, which included Emilie Drinkwater, Kirstin Kramer, and Janet Bergman, made the first ascents of four other unclimbed 6,000 meter mountains in the region.



Above are three of the peaks we climbed collectively.

Photo, Mark Richey

## **Tsok Kangri**

Our route on Tsok Kangri was the best pure-ice climb I've done in the Karakorum or Himalaya. It reminded me of the Black dike, a classic New England Ice Climb, only 4 to 5 times as long and finishing at over 22,000 ft.! We climbed it in one long 22-hour day.

## **Saserling and Pumo Kangri**

Janet and Freddie's route on Saserling was another classic climb, 8 pitches of stellar rock climbing with excellent rock quality and challenging climbing on every pitch. Pumo Kangri, which means "Ladies Mountain" in Ladakhi looked like a giant snow plod at first but turned out to be sustained low-angle ice for the entire climb. Emilie and Kirsten carried only one ice screw but nonetheless pushed on to the summit climbing mainly without belays. The descent however required rappelling and with only one screw to cut v-threads and belay the process took them all night! They arrived at ABC the next morning after a 29-hour continuous push, passing Janet and Freddie on their way up to climb Saserling!



Freddie Wilkinson leading perfect ice on the First ascent of Tsok Kangri

Photo, Mark Richey



Photo, Mark Richey

### **Stegasaurus**

We named this peak “Stegasaurus” since the line of rock towers leading up the ridge reminded us of the dinosaur. Although not a difficult climb technically, we had a lot of fun and it was great to do a climb altogether (only Steve was absent). Also, the return to ABC from our high camp made for the best skiing of the trip. You can see our fresh tracks in the foreground.

### **Indian team members**

Our Indian members and BC staff were a big part of the expedition’s success and although none of them reached any summits we could not have done so without them. Not only did they take outstanding care of us in BC but they did all the heavy work of supplying our ABC with food and equipment. This effort required a climb over a 6,000 meter pass from BC and roughly 12 kilometers of glacier traverse to get to our ABC on the South Shukpa.

Chewang Motup, Co-leader  
Raj Kumar, Liason Officer  
Konchok Thinlese, Sirdar  
Pemba Sherpa (aka King Kong), Climber  
Dhan Singh Harkotia, Climber  
Jangla Tashi Phunchok, Climber  
Tshering Sherpa, Climber  
Santabir Sherpa, Chief Cook  
Arjun Rai, Cook’s helper  
Aungchok, Cook’s helper  
Mahipal, Kitchen Boy



Our Indian team at Base Camp performing the “Puja” ceremony. Photo, Mark Richey



Steve and Freddie enjoying the last rays of light near the summit of Tsok Kangri Photo, Mark Richey

## Expedition Summary –

First Ascent, **Saser Kangri II**, 7,518 meters via the Southwest Face, "The Old Breed". WI 4 M3, 1,700 meters. August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Richey, Swenson, Wilkinson.

First ascent, **Tsok Kangri**, 6,585 meters via the north face, WI4+, 680 meters. July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011. Richey, Swenson, Wilkinson.

First ascent, **Pumo Kangri**, 6,250 meters via West Face, WI3, 450 meters. August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Drinkwater and Kremer.

First Ascent, **SaserLing**, 6,100 meters via the South Face. 5.9+, 8 pitches, 350 meters August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Bergman and Wilkinson.

First Ascent, **Stegasaurus**, 6,660 meters, via the south glacier to south ridge. Steep snow climbing and ridge traverse. August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Bergman, Drinkwater, Kremer, Richey, and Wilkinson.

Finally, I'd like to extend big thanks to our equipment sponsors;

**Mountain Hardwear**

**Wild Things**

**Black Diamond**

**Arcteryx**

**Cliffbar**

**Julbo**

Many thanks to **Rimo Expeditions**, our outstanding agent in India that handled all our travel, permitting and logistics so seamlessly.

Thanks to the **American Alpine club** for their support and encouragement of our expedition.

And finally thanks to my wife Teresa, for being there always!

Mark Richey  
September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011  
Newburyport, MA