

CHANCY HUNT BEYOND SHANGRI-LA



A Chinese patrol advanced toward us far below. Should I remain hidden, or risk shooting one of the ibex I'd adventured so far to find?

By Elgin T. Gates

Photographs by the Author

■ The exact notation on the map reads, "Chinese boundary approximate." Beside it is the cryptic note: "Not fully explored." My altimeter reads 16,600 feet.

The past hour has been an agony of climbing step-by-step through the dark-gray cloud mass, visibility nearly zero. The two Hunza *shikaris*, Aman Shah and Sheree Ali Khan, display increasing signs of altitude sickness. They are near the limits of their endurance.

We have just reached a rocky ledge and pause to rest our straining lungs. Abruptly, the misty cloud layer is whipped away, the swirling snowflakes with it. The view is breathtaking. We are high above the pass, looking at an incredible panorama of immense glaciers and snowy peaks. I kneel down and study the map hoping to find something we can orient to. It is useless. The area we are in has no clear landmarks.

Suddenly Aman Shah points down the long windswept slope to a low part of the pass. Two black dots are visible against the snow. Quickly bringing my binocular to eye level, I see two Chinese soldiers, with rifles slung on their backs, mounted on yaks. They are wearing dark quilted coats and peaked hats with flaps covering their ears. They ride hunched forward straining against the icy wind.

I look around at the lay of the terrain and feel a quick surge of fear. We are well beyond the pass and must be inside China, regardless of the map notations. I pull the two *shikaris* down behind the rocky ledge.

The one thing I want to avoid at all costs is a confrontation with a Chinese patrol. We found their tracks down the valley on the Hunza side two hours ago, and only a desperate need for food brought us to this lofty, unnamed pass.

As I study the advancing patrol with my binocular, my mind drifts back 72 hours. . . . Individual snowflakes come slanting out of the dark sky as we reach the two stone shepherd's huts at the foot of Wad Khun pass. With me are 18 men of Hunza—Hunzakuts, they are called—and three half-tamed yaks. This is the third day of forced marching. During the last 16 hours since leaving the main trail we have covered 19 miles

of difficult terrain. The dim tortuous trail has led across perilous 60° slopes, through labyrinths of shattered moraine and creaking glacial ice. Once we climbed hand over hand up a rocky chimney to detour around a sheer cliff. According to my altimeter, the altitude has varied between 10,000 and 12,500 feet.

I slump, exhausted, against one of the low huts as the yaks are unloaded. The animals are led into a small stone enclosure and the entrance is blocked. Several of the men gather *burtsa*, a small sagebrushlike plant with an oily tap root. It provides the only fuel in this high, desolate valley.

I am deep in the heart of central Asia in a lofty region known as *Bam-i-dunya*, the legendary roof-of-the-world. It is a land of spectacular beauty; of misty, hidden valleys and magnificent snowy mountains in the Kingdom of Hunza, a tiny state between Afghanistan and West Pakistan on so-called "Red Chinese" border.

It is a land of danger; of massive, grinding glaciers and thundering avalanches; of shrieking winds and merciless storms; uninhabited by mankind. It is the abode of that mythical creature, the abominable snowman; of one of the world's premier big-game trophies, the great scimitar-horned ibex, *Capra siberica*, the king of Asia's wild goat family. This is the prize that has lured me to this remote country at world's end.

Within minutes after our arrival at Wad Khun, a strong wind comes whistling down from the pass, bringing a torrent of dry snow pellets with it. Fifteen of the men take refuge in the larger hut. Four of us crawl into the other. With me is Sultan Ali, my interpreter, and Sheree Ali Khan and Aman Shah, the two Hunza *shikaris*. Aman Shah is the only man in the party who has been in this rugged country. Long ago, he once journeyed to the Chinese border.

I unroll my sleeping bag and crawl into it, clothes and all, as the men kindle a tiny fire against the opposite wall and brew tea.

As I drink a second cup of hot tea, the storm breaks upon us—a monstrous, raging storm. The men pile stones in the narrow doorway, and converse in fearful tones; they chink crevices in the walls with smaller stones, (Continued on page 108)

Chancy Hunt Beyond Shangri-La

(Continued from page 66)

sealing us in. The wind rises to a screaming crescendo and beats against the hut with cyclonic fury. In spite of my companions' efforts, the fire is snuffed out and cannot be rekindled. I manage to light a stub of candle inside a small bottle. By its dim flickering light I watch in fascination and dread as snow pellets come spilling through the rock walls to form pyramids on the floor.

Is this as far as we go? Should we turn back and try to reach the main trail before the snow builds up so high we can't fight our way through?

The only entrance into this mysterious land is through a narrow, green-terraced valley, the tiny kingdom of Hunza, sometimes called Shangri-la. Precise details of the country beyond Hunza are unknown. Maps are marked with the note: *Not fully explored.*

I had planned to be in Hunza in September, but events in Karachi, the capital of West Pakistan, where all my permits were issued, had delayed the expedition a full month. It was late October when I finally reached Gilgit, the northernmost outpost of the old British colonial empire in Kashmir, now part of Pakistan.

In four days I marched 65 miles from Gilgit through the Hunza valley to Baltit, where I was cordially welcomed by Mir Mohammed Jamal Khan, the ruler of Hunza. When I told him of my desire to hunt ibex in the high country he assigned two of his men to accompany me, Sultan Ali and Shere Ali Khan. The Mir also warned of the dangers that lay ahead: "Winter is coming and there will be terrible storms and avalanches. If you get trapped in deep snow you cannot escape. There is no food except what

little you can carry and the game you can bag."

I gave him my solemn assurance I would be extremely careful, then I turned in early. But sleep would not come and I lay awake for hours in sober thought of the ordeal ahead.

It is now October 29, far too late in the season to be marching into a little-known region, and yet speed is essential if I am to have any chance of success. I must get to the high country and return as quickly as possible. This means leaving all my equipment behind except what is absolutely necessary.

October 30

The early sun slants in from a deep-blue sky, warm and brilliant, as I make the final adjustments on my saddle. I remember a few more essential items and get them from my duffle bags: heavy wool gloves, skinning knife, pocket altimeter and thermometer and my small medical kit.

The Mir comes over and puts his arm around my shoulder saying, "I will be praying for your success. Beware of Chinese patrols. They sometimes cross over the passes and come several miles down into Hunza territory. If you should get caught it could create an international incident." I acknowledge his concern and thank him for the help he has given me. We part with a handshake.

With Sultan Ali leading, we head up the trail at a swift canter. The Mir has provided the best horses available, fresh and in good condition. We soon reach a mass of black ice, Ghulkin glacier, coming down a rock-splintered cleft in Batura peak, which towers 25,450 feet. I look up at the massive ice-bound summit and shudder as I remember what the Mir told me yesterday. *This is the peak where the five German*

climbers were killed. They were the only other outsiders to enter the Hunza valley this year. We slow down to pick our way across. This glacier moves 20 feet a day, and yesterday's trail is obliterated.

Abruptly the sun is blotted out. I look up to see a solid charcoal sky. A strong wind strikes us head on, and soon snowflakes come sweeping in. We canter the horses when the trail allows and dismount and lead them up the steep, rugged traverses. At the village of Passu we stop long enough to water the horses and push on across a desertlike plateau. We come to the gigantic Batura glacier, three miles across and winding at least 25 miles up into the Batura peaks. Dismounting, we slowly lead our horses across the crumbling moraine and over the narrow treacherous trail leading from one ridge of ice to another. Occasionally I can hear the ominous rumble of ice grinding against the solid granite buttresses of the mountain. Vibrations from the movement of the ice-mass give me an eerie and fearful sensation. We move with great care. Once my horse slips and almost plunges into a crevasse. It is a vast relief to climb out of the moraine and continue on a solid trail.

There are four inches of snow on the ground when we reach the *dak*-bungalow—rest house—at Khaibar. The valiant horses are finished. I unroll my sleeping bag on the wooden bunk and fall asleep, exhausted, as Shere Ali Khan builds a fire. They wake me for a hot meal of mutton, curry and stewed apricots.

Altitude, 8800 feet. Temperature 18° F. Distance traveled, 22 miles.

October 31

I learn that Sultan Ali has been given unlimited authority by the Mir to commandeer any-

thing we need. He also has instructions to hand-pick 16 of the best men in the valley. Fresh horses are being saddled as I drink hot tea. There is a crowd of men gathered in front of the bungalow and Sultan Ali is arguing with them. When he comes in I question him in detail. He tells me that every man in Khaibar wants to come with us.

Seven of us ride out of Khaibar. The new men ride with straight-backed pride. They are splendid fellows with flashing eyes and unconcealed elation at being among the chosen few. More men are eager to join us when we reach the village of Molkhun. The arguments are repeated. We are 11 strong leaving Molkhun. It is almost dark when we reach Sost, the last Hunza village in the valley. There is great excitement at our arrival. Sultan Ali is presiding over intense arguments as I go to sleep.

Altitude 9100 feet. Temperature 26°. Distance 21 miles.

November 1

A big crowd is gathered around the *dak*-bungalow this morning. Sultan Ali tells me the last eight men have been chosen. We have three yaks which will carry most of our food supply.

We dismount at the turnoff where the men pile up our supplies. After the yaks are loaded, the rest is divided into small packs of about 25 pounds each. There is only a remnant of a trail. Sultan Ali tells me this valley is traversed only by a few of the Mir's shepherds who bring in some flocks of domestic sheep to graze in the summer.

Even though we are walking now, our pace is swift. The Hunzakuts are magnificent. We are climbing through steep defiles and across rock slides, constantly ascending slopes 2000 to 3000 feet, then working our way back down to the Khunjerab River. Our *khud* or hill staffs are indispensable for maintaining balance on the 50° and 60° slopes we must cross. The yaks are marvelous animals. They go through difficult terrain a horse would never attempt.

At this altitude the only vegetation other than grass is the thin willows in the narrow river bottom and the scrubby *burtsa*. Around us, snowy peaks dominate the horizon, and the near landscape is a chaos of boulder-strewn slopes. It is nearly dark when we reach the shepherd's huts at Wad Khun.

Altitude 11,000 feet. Temperature 32°.

November 2

This morning the wind has abated. When the stones are removed from the hut entrance, we step out into a phenomenon that mountain climbers fear—the dreaded whiteout—where there are no shadows, no horizon, no grays or tones. Fortunately, most of the snow has been scoured away by the screaming north wind, leaving the ground bare and dark.

Aman Shah claims to know the way. With some trepidation I decide to push on. The dim trail ascends steeply. In two hours, climbing slowly and with extreme caution, we reach the top of the frigid pass and have to chop our way through the narrow ice-blocked defile. We pause to rest. The whiteout is getting thinner. I check the altimeter and thermometer. Altitude, 14,400 feet. Temperature, 54°. I look again to make sure. Fifty-four degrees is correct. That explains the whiteout. A mass of warm air has flooded up the valley from the country below. Merging with the cold air of the upper regions, it creates another problem even more dangerous—avalanches!

I catch up with the caravan, and we traverse back and forth across perilous slopes, working

downward. Crossing a steep shale slope I notice a few silver-dollar-sized stones racing silently down the slope from above. I pay little attention, but the avalanche-wise Hunzakuts react instantly.

"Go quickly, sahib," Aman Shah shouts, pointing to a buttress of rock 50 yards away. We run for our lives, reaching the buttress just as a churning river of snow and shale comes pouring by. None of the men is caught, but we pay a costly price. One of our three yaks, the one loaded with a good portion of our food, is swept down the chasm and buried forever.

The next avalanche is more noisy. Shattered blocks of glacial ice and boulders, loosened by the warm air, come thundering down from far above. We race madly to get out of their path and that of the main avalanche which follows.

The valley is narrow and the stream has dwindled when we finally reach the bottom. We have to ford the icy waters every few

hundred feet. I ride across on one of the surviving yaks, but the men pull off their skin boots and wade, then walk barefooted through the snow to the next crossing. *We must get out of this avalanche zone!*

We reach a point of relative safety where the valley widens, and stop, exhausted. I order the two yaks unloaded while the men gather *burtsa* and build fires. As tea is being brewed, we open the packs and inventory the food that is left. There is not enough to continue and have any margin of safety. Our survival will depend on what game I can shoot. As a last resort—and I push the brutal thought out of my mind—we can kill the two surviving yaks.

The men all know we are in trouble. They squat around the little fires, conversing in low tones. They are waiting for me to make a decision. We really should turn back, but the hunger in my heart to reach the high valley of the scimitar-horned ibex is greater than reason.

We load up and push on. The wind strikes again, bringing lashing snow that slicks the rocks and makes footing dangerous. We stumble on. It is late afternoon when we reach the entrance of what Aman Shah calls the *sakin nullah*—the ibex valley. We find shelter under the overhanging ledge of a gigantic boulder.

Food is rigidly rationed. The Hunzakuts bake small *chapattis*, a thick, tortillalike bread, on fire-heated stones, using the dwindling supply of coarse stone-ground meal that each man carries; and we share a few handfuls of dried apricots. They huddle together under the ledge and roll up in their long-sleeved *chogas*, keeping tiny willow-and-bursta fires burning around themselves. *God help us if there is a heavy snow-fall!*

Altitude, 13,100 feet. Temperature 8°. Distance 15 miles?

November 3

There are six inches of snow on the ground as daylight comes. Sultan Ali is kneeling beside me, facing toward Mecca, reading prayers from his small Koran as he does every morning. "Inshallah," he says, his face serious, "you will get the *sakin* today so we can return, or we will all die here."

Time is very critical. *How much longer will this capricious high-altitude weather hold off?*

I decide to take Aman Shah and Sheree Ali Khan and leave the rest of the men to rest. A mile up the rocky *nullah* we spot a wild yak on a distant cloud-obscured slope. We attempt a stalk, which fails when a blinding snow flurry obliterates the tracks. We continue, searching the shrouded slopes on both sides for yaks and ibex.

Aman Shah sees something in the snow and motions to me. Fresh yak tracks! They can't be more than 15 minutes old! I raise my binocular to look for them, but visibility is blotted out by swirling snow. We advance less than 100 yards when I see a small dark object on the snow. Stooping to pick it up, I feel an instant surge of fear. It is an empty match box inscribed with Chinese characters. *Instead of wild yaks, we are tracking a Chinese patrol mounted on tame yaks!*

The two *shikaris* grasp the significance of the match box a few seconds after I do, and the impact is devastating. They cast fearful eyes up the valley and whisper to each other. Instinctively, I check my rifle again, suddenly thankful for the snowy curtain that limits visibility.

"What do you think?" I ask Aman Shah, who seems to have recovered his aplomb.

"Sahib," he says, putting one hand on his stomach, "we are very hungry, yes? And you wish to shoot the *sakin* with big horns, yes?"

"Yes," I agree.

"Then we must go up there," he says, pointing toward the pass.

"What about the Chinese?"

"They will follow the *jilga* on the right side of the *nullah*, sahib. We should go high on the slope to the left."

As we begin the march, a bitter wind comes probing from the pass, turning the snowflakes to icy pellets that sting and numb our faces. For an hour, we ascend into the gray, wind-whipped cloud mass and come to the rocky ledge—and the oncoming Chinese patrol.

We should be safe as long as we remain hidden behind the ledge. Looking ahead of them, I can see that the valley leading down the Chinese side of the pass turns and comes directly under us, about 600 yards down the slope, before turning north again.

Carefully, I sweep the surrounding terrain

with my binocular, particularly the slope behind us that leads back over the ridge into Hunza. I want to make sure there are no more Chinese in the vicinity. If these two spot us, which is possible, and come up the smooth barren slope in pursuit, my scope-sighted .300 magnum will be more than a match for their rifles, which appear to be military arms equipped with open sights. I intend to avoid trouble, but I have already made up my mind to shoot rather than submit to capture. [*This was before the Nixon déteinte with China—Editor*]

Scanning the slope below again, I see something else—a herd of six ibex, slowly heading up the slope directly toward our position. They have been down in the valley after dry grass and are now moving out ahead of the oncoming patrol. All six are big bucks. The leader is carrying massive, swept-back horns that are longer than any I have ever seen. I point them out to the two *shikaris*. The wind is right—still blowing strongly from China. The ibex aren't really alarmed, but are simply moving toward our ledge, stopping now and then to feed on the sparse tufts of dry grass sticking out of the snow.

Warning the *shikaris* to remain motionless, I find a slot between two boulders where I can see both the ibex and the Chinese patrol, which is now heading away from us. I wait, in a quandary, hoping the ibex will continue their slow, feeding ascent until the patrol is well down the valley. Twenty minutes go by. The patrol is now almost a mile away and the ibex are nearing a low cut in the ledge about 75 yards to our left. I ease the barrel of my rifle through the slot and center carefully on the big leader. He slumps down at my shot while the other five spring wildly in all directions, one bounding over the rocks we are hiding behind. I raise my binocular and train it on the patrol, which moves stolidly onward. The strong oncoming wind has muffled the shot, as I hoped it would.

Posting Sheree Ali Khan to keep a sharp lookout, Aman Shah and I quickly cape the head and clean and halve the carcass. With the *shikaris* carrying the meat and me the caped head, we waste no time heading back up the slope.

Snowflakes come whirling out of China as we top the ridge and start down the long incline into Hunza. I have a feeling that all our luck—

and then some—has been used up. I have no desire to push it any further. Now our move is to head back to the lower Hunza valley at first light in the morning.

We reach our makeshift camp under the boulder just as the dark sky closes in. The tiny winking fires are a welcome sight. Later, sipping hot tea while the aroma from roasting chunks of ibex *kebab* pervades the air, I watch the silent feathery snow building up outside our shelter. Our margin of safety is still razor-thin, but I make no effort to stop the Hunzakuts from gorging themselves on ibex meat. We must summon every ounce of strength to fight through the snow that already has fallen.

November 4

It is 4:30 a.m. and still dark. Temperature 11° below zero. Sultan Ali is praying as we wait for dawn. The snow is at least a foot deep on level ground but it is soft and dry, easy to march through. Hopefully the avalanche zone will be frozen in. The thing that worries me is climbing the steep traverses to the top of Wad Khun pass. We load up and move out. Speed is the only thing that can save us.

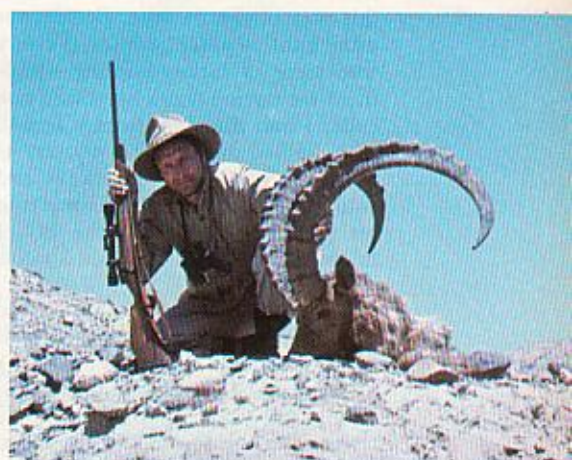
November 5

Our luck has held. Last night we camped in a thin clump of willows at the bottom of Wad Khun pass. A howling wind blew most of the night, scouring away part of the snow. This morning, in a protected basin near the summit of the pass, we struggle through snowdrifts eight and 10 feet deep. The faithful yaks are accustomed to breaking trail. For two hours there is no surety we will make it. But the sheer courage and determination of the Hunzakuts, taking turns at the vanguard when the yaks are played out, carry us to the cloud-obscured summit. The other side of the pass is swept clean of snow. We have won!

I look back once to make sure all our men are accounted for. They come striding out of the mist, jubilant at reaching safety. In time, I may forget some of the details of this incredible journey beyond Shangri-la, but the ghostlike image of those great scimitar horns bobbing out of the mist on the back of the man who carries them will be etched in my memory forever.—Elgin T. Gates



"That's really a terrific camouflage suit, Harry. ...uh... Harry?... Harry!..."



Hunting the great scimitar-horned ibex (far left) in central Asia's Kingdom of Hunza demands perseverance. Trip begins with the fording of icy streams and continues with dangerous treks over 14,000-foot mountain passes. Gates (above) persisted, got trophy.