

Chalt Valley, Pakistan

Autumn 2025



Summary

In September-October 2025, a group of five of us travelled to the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan to go mountaineering. There we were joined by 3 local climbers and travelled by jeep and foot up the Chalt valley to a basecamp at the forks of the Baltar and Toltar glaciers.

After initial extended bad weather, where we hung out with the shepherds and ate large amounts of goat, three teams attempted routes:

Gemma, Sinead and myself attempted the first ascent of Muncho (~5800m) via its E face and NE ridge but turned back at 5600m.

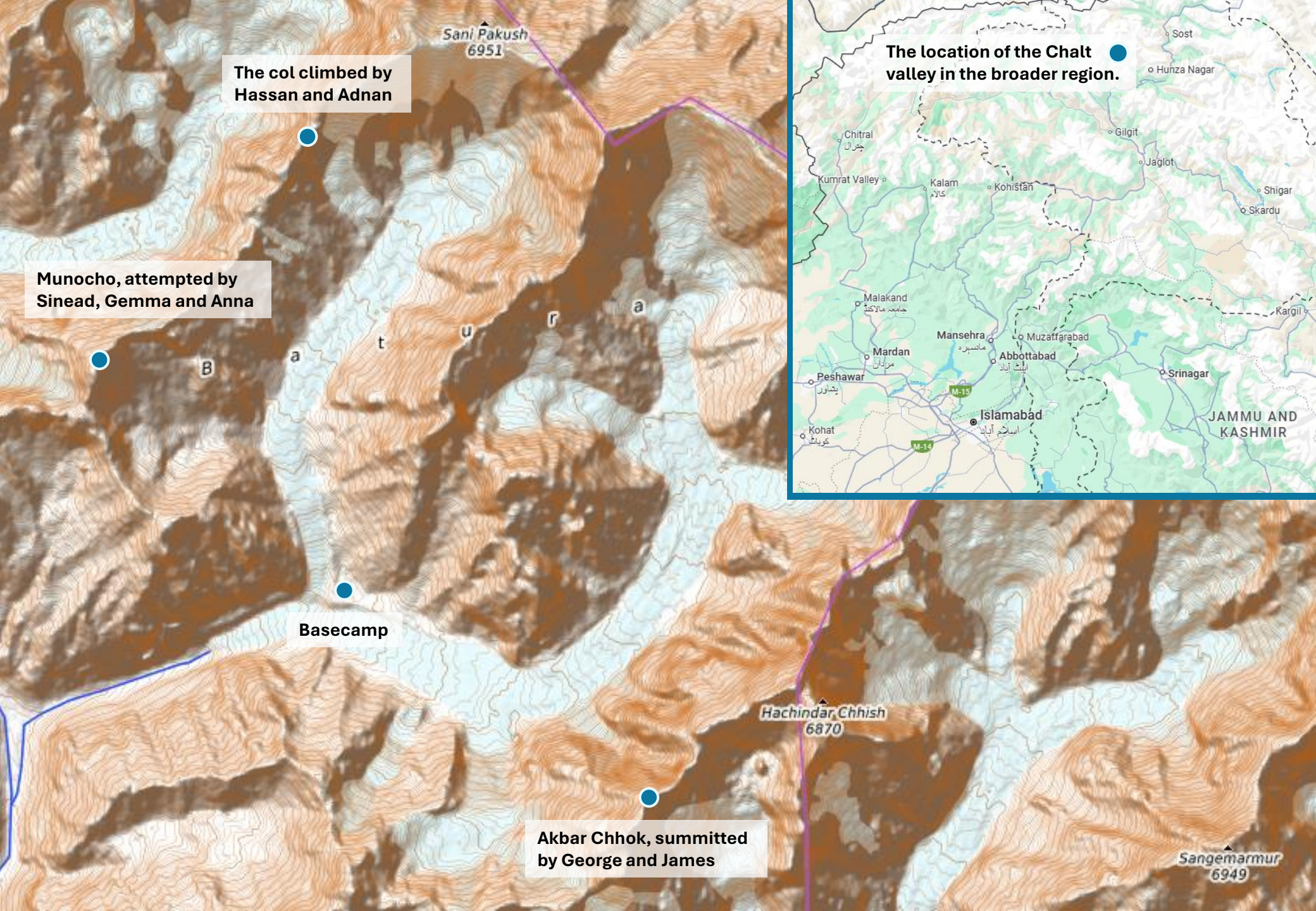
Hassan and Adnan climbed to the col West of Sani Pakkush, aiming to cross into the next valley, but were also turned back by deep snow.

George and James climbed a new 3000m route (M6, W15, A2), spending 9 days on the mountain and making the possible first ascent of 'Akbar Chhok' (6673m).

Overall, the trip was defined by the incredible welcome we received from the locals. Our basecamp was a small summer shepherds' settlement, and our 'cook-tent' was a stone hut belonging to the family of Akbar, a local hunter. During the bad weather, we often played games, ate, drank and danced with the shepherds, and when we went climbing, they watched out from the valley.

Sinead and Gemma switching between snow and ice at ~ 5500m on the NE ridge of Muncho.





The col climbed by Hassan and Adnan

Munocho, attempted by Sinead, Gemma and Anna

Basecamp

Akbar Chhok, summited by George and James

The location of the Chalt valley in the broader region.

Travel to Basecamp

Sinead, Gemma, James and I arrived together in Islamabad on the morning of the 23rd September. George, who had just returned to civilization after spending Summer on an Alaskan shipping boat, flew out a few days later. We took a taxi to the bus station in Rawalpindi, then, while Sinead and Gemma watched our stacks of bags, James and I got on a bike and went on a mission to find camping gas and cash. By early afternoon we were on a bus to Aliabad, a small town in Hunza in the North. James, for whom this was his 5th or 6th trip to Pakistan, kept repeating that he couldn't believe how smoothly everything was going. The bus drove through the night, and we arrived in Aliabad the next morning, where Hassan, a friend James', met us and drove us to Nomad hostel for breakfast.

We soon found out that James was well known in Aliabad, and local friends of his, many of whom he had introduced to climbing, came and went all morning. There was some discussion about who would stay and watch the hostel, and who could join us as a third climbing team. There was some debate about porters too, and we had conflicting advice here. Tom had given us a bunch of advice beforehand and told us he had taken 30 porters on his last trip, and we should make sure we had things like camping chairs to make basecamp comfortable. James had never used a porter before and spoke positively of his experiences with 35kg bags and 6 people sharing a 2-man tent on the mountain. Eventually, our gear bags were slimmed down, and we settled on taking ~5 porters between the 8 of us, partly because it was also decided that we needed to take 20kg of flour and a chapatti pan to basecamp. Hassan, Adnan, and Najeeb would join us for some of our time at basecamp, and Hassan sent a friend to the last village in the Chalt valley to speak with the locals and arrange porters and for a local to accompany us.

Top: Gemma telling Hassan it was all going to fit (it did).

Bottom: Some light construction work to get the jeep down the valley.



Towards the end of the week, with all food and logistics finally arranged, Gemma, Sinead, Hassan and I walked into our basecamp with Akbar, a local hunter and shepherd. We each carried a 25kg bag, and I spent a lot of the walk regretting not training cardio and struggling in the heat, while the porters, with equivalently heavy bags, ran ahead in their rubber shoes and jeans. George, Adnan and Hassan waited for James to arrive and joined us 3 days later.

Our basecamp was at around 3400m at the fork of the Toltar and Baltar glaciers (which translates, in local dialect, to left-pastures and right-pastures). This was a large, sandy pasture inhabited by a small group of shepherds, a very large number of goats, and a few cows. Some of the shepherds, spoke a few words of English, but largely we communicated via the Aliabad guys or by exchanging food.

Acclimatization

We spent the first day setting up camp and walking a little way up the glaciers to get a better view of some mountains. It had been a very dry summer, and things looked quite different to expected. After some debate, we decided that the peak called Muncho, an unclimbed mountain between 5700 and 6000m, depending on the map, looked the most plausible for us. With weather looking good for the next couple of days only, we planned to walk up to below its east face, and maybe gain the ridge, for acclimatization.

Left: A friendly goat we were introduced to on arriving at basecamp.

Right: Being served the goat's heart later that evening.

Next pages: The pastures around BC and our luxury 'cook-tent'







We walked up to below the glacier under the E face the next day. Gemma ran up ahead, while Sinead and I struggled with heavy bags and loose boulders, at one point debating whether to get our axes out for the steep mud. By the time we reached 4600, we were exhausted. We bivied here, unwilling to put up the single skin tent on sharp rocks, and woke up slightly snowy and with splitting headaches the next day. We stashed our climbing gear, boots and tent and headed back to camp.

Clockwise from right: Muncho, before it was covered in snow. Gemma looking much more comfortable than Sinead and I on the walk up. Sinead, Hassan and Gemma walking up pastures with Sani Pakkush in the background.



Bad weather days

We had expected 2 or 3 days of bad weather, but the next 8 days it snowed on and off, and the mountains stayed largely in the clouds. We largely rested at basecamp and watched with some concern as snow built up on the mountain where our gear was stashed. These somewhat blurred together, but some entertaining things happened:

- When the others joined at basecamp, we found out that the road to the last village had collapsed in the time between us driving in, and the jeep trying to drive out. They'd stayed stuck overnight, then had helped the locals rebuild the road. Apparently, this is common.
- We learnt how the shepherds trap and hunt animals, and one of Hassan's favourite phrases: "No legislation without representation" (GB has no representation in the Pakistani parliament).
- Several of us started whittling cutlery, which was useful since we were low on spoons at the start of the trip.
- I found a waterfall to shower under. Unfortunately, it was two hours walk from camp and helmets were recommended because of the occasional chunk of ice.
- Sinead, Gemma and I attempted some rock climbing in what turned out to be a non-existent weather window.
- We gradually got better at making phitti – local bread cooked directly on coals. We started with loaves which were burnt and raw but eventually managed to make ones which were only burnt.
- Two poles were broken in the moraines, and my trainers fell apart. Firstly, because their soles tore off in the moraines, and then because I left one to dry too close to the fire.

Top: Hassan stroking his soon-to-be dinner.

Below: A selection of my whittled cutlery collection (and a testament to how long the bad weather lasted).



An attempt at some rock climbing: a fantastic looking unclimbed wall, which Sinead did a great job of down-climbing when the snow started.



Route Attempts

The weather finally turned around the 11th October, and we set off in three teams. Gemma, Sinead and I would return to our gear, and aim to climb Muncho. Najeeb had returned to the valley, but Hassan and Adnan aimed to climb to a col to the West of Sani Pakush, and cross into the next valley to explore this. George and James had their eyes on a huge ridge that towered above basecamp, leading to the summit of a potentially unclimbed peak North of Hachindar Chhish.

With much lighter bags, we headed back up to our gear stash. We'd made the pretty regrettable decision of leaving our climbing boots up there, and the hill below our gear was now largely covered in snow, but we made good progress with trainers. We found our gear with some relief, and continued up the glacier, this time digging out a nice platform to actually pitch the tent.

The following morning, we left at first light, having massively underestimated how long it would take to melt snow for the three of us. It was soon apparent that the fresh snow was going to be an issue. The ground hadn't frozen overnight, and we took turns breaking trail but moved painfully slowly: it took us 5 hours to gain the 300m to the base of a plausible looking gully on the East Face.

We debated whether to stop here: it was past midday, and we would not be making it to another possible camp before dark if we continued, but moving on seemed essential if we wanted a shot at the summit. The gully ended up being ~300m of climbing, starting with ice, then some vertical snow swimming, and finally some mixed climbing that was possibly around M4 (but it's quite hard to judge in the dark, with a tent in the bag, at over 5000m). We got into the tent on the ridge at 1am.

Top: Wading up knee deep snow in trainers to retrieve our gear.

Bottom: Sinead starting up ice at the bottom of the E face.



The next morning, we considered two options: leave our tent as some other gear and try and climb as far as we could that day before turning back, or take everything and expect to camp higher on the ridge again. After very little sleep and knowing that we would run out of food the following day, we chose the first option, and continued up the ridge with much lighter bags. The ridge switched between steep snow swimming and glacial ice, and progress was slow but steady. We climbed a sub-peak on the ridge at 5600m then dropped down to the top of a wide snow gully - much wider than our rope length.

Here, we realised how far away the true summit still looked and decided to turn back: a combination of avalanche risk in the gully, exhaustion and a lack of food made this the most appealing option. That evening, we rappelled our climbing line back to the glacier, and we walked back to camp the following day. This was painless and uneventful until the last boulder field, where Sinead slipped and hit her front teeth. After a few messages exchanged with Dave via our InReach, it was decided that she would walk out with Akbar and I the following day.

On our walk down, Akbar told us that Najeeb, Hassan and Adnan had spoken to him about exploring a different side valley the following year and that this time the plan was that Akbar would join them climbing too.

At the last settlement, we met Akbar's wife, and this time, without the jeep, we walked through to the next village, where we drank tea, and ate chappatis with his children. By evening, we were on a bus back to Aliabad. The dental care in GB was very good (and free!), and the next day Sinead had her teeth fixed back in place. The public bus proved less reliable, and after a 22 hour journey, with several unexplained, multi-hour road maintenance stops, I made it to Islamabad at 5 in the morning.

Questing up the last pitch of mixed climbing to reach the ridge



The snow gully where we turned around. The summit is probably the furthest point on the ridge we could see at this point, or just behind this.



Our rough climbing line and camps on the ascent.



George and James' 3000m first ascent, which they graded ~M6, WI5, A2.
Left: technical ice climbing, and a watch party back at camp.

Akbar Chhok, 6673m

'Secrets, Shepherds, Sex and Serendipity'



In the meantime, Hassan and Adnan climbed over 2 days to their col, also struggling in the deep snow. Reaching the col, they decided (one tent pole down) they decided the snow and broken terrain to descend into the next valley was more than they had the food or energy for and also turned back.

George and James were more persistent. Their ridge had sections of snow, but also large amounts of hard aid and mixed climbing. They left with 5 days of food, and spent 9 days on the mountain, with a summit bivy at 6670m on the 7th night. Their full route was visible from basecamp, and each night the shepherds would look out for their headlamps to trace their progress. Akbar walked back up after Sinead and I had left, and the pair were welcomed back to the pastures with dancing and celebratory rifle shots.

Acknowledgements

A huge thanks to the Imperial College Exploration Board, the Old Centralian's trust, the Alpine club and Mountain Equipment for the gear and financial support they provided, without which this trip would not have been possible. Many thanks also to all those who gave advice before and during the trip, including Tom Livingstone, David Hillebrandt and many others. Above all, we'd like to thank the guys from Aliabad and the Chalt valley for being so welcoming.

Top: Sinead looking a bit tired after a 'night's sleep' on the ridge.

Bottom: My shoes walking back out to the valley: the sock was there to stop the duct tape being torn apart too fast.

Next page, clockwise: Sinead grateful to have Gemma to send up the questionable mixed climbing this time, a tent spot on route, and some dancing with the shepherds.



