



On their whirlwind trip Mike Pennings (left) and Jonathan Copp raced up Hainablak Tower (left), Cat's Ears Spire (center), and Shipton Spire (right), and still managed to sit still for the five or six seconds it took to take this photograph.

JONATHAN COPP

Rocket men

Copp and Pennings blaze tower after tower in Pakistan

This summer was bountiful for American teams on the superb granite spires of Pakistan's Karakoram Range. On the west side of the Trango Glacier, a team of two couples, Roxanna Brock and Brian McCray, and Heather Baer and Steve Schneider, made the first ascent of the 3500-vertical-foot Hainablak Tower, via an all-free route, *For Better or For Worse* (VI 5.12a). Nearby, the Boulder-based climbers Brian McMahon and Josh Wharton put up new routes on Little Trango and the lower buttress of Hainablak. Exploring in the Kharidas Valley (north of the well-known Nangma Valley), Nils Davis, Todd Offenbacher, and Canadian Sean Isaac found *Free Kashmir* (5.10 R), a superb 2300-foot knife-edge ridge. And gaining access to the previously off-limits Kondus Valley, a disputed military zone between India and Pakistan, Dave Anderson, Jimmy Chin, Steph Davis, and Brady Robinson established *All Quiet On The Eastern Front* (VI 5.11 A3) on a 3300-foot spire they christened Tahir Tower.

Yet, while those climbs were impressive, none of them demonstrated quite the same élan as those of Jonathan Copp and Mike Pennings. In a handful of climbing days the Colorado-based climbers fired off mostly-free ascents of three huge towers, and showed just what was possible, for the talented and ambitious, on an alpine big-wall trip.

This was the first time that Copp and Pennings had visited Pakistan. They came to attempt the first ascent of Hainablak, but that plan changed as soon as they saw the giant spires lining the Trango Glacier. "From Shipton basecamp, you look around and see Hainablak, Cat's Ears [Spire], and Shipton itself," says Pennings. "We looked at each other and said, 'We should do all three!'"

The couples' team was already well-established on their Hainablak

route, *For Better or For Worse*, so Copp and Pennings began on the unclimbed Cat's Ears Spire. To move faster, they traveled light, forsaking haulbags and portaledges in favor of a day-pack-sized load of one tent and one sleeping bag. "Fortunately, we always found a ledge where we could set up the tent," says Pennings. "At night, we'd both get in the sleeping bag and spoon." On their second attempt (the first was curtailed by bad weather) they made the first ascent of the spire, via *Freebird* (VI 5.11+ A0), a 3500-foot route that went all free except for three pendulums — and in a mere two days. The final pitch was spectacular, an unprotected 35-foot block leading to a magic-carpet summit so small it was impossible to arrange a belay. To reach the top, both climbers had to lead and then down-climb the dicey pitch.

After a short rest in basecamp, the two then fired the second ascent of Hainablak. The couples' team had almost three weeks' head start on the spire, but incredibly, Copp and Pennings established a new route and almost reached the summit first. *Tague It To The Top* (VI 5.11 A2) went 90-percent free and took two and half days.

Finally, the two ticked the granddaddy of the group, 4500-vertical-foot Shipton Spire, via the second ascent of *Inshallah*. Pennings describes the route, first climbed by the Americans Kennan Harvey, Seth Shaw, and Steph Davis in 1998, as "phenomenal," on bullet granite "as good as El Cap." Unlike the first ascent team, who climbed multiple pitches of 5.12 and freed the whole route apart from two points of aid, Copp and Pennings pulled on gear when the going got tough. Then again, the first ascent took 14 days, Copp and Pennings' required three. Rarely have truer words been spoken than Pennings' summation: "Speed was our deal."

Having ticked the Shipton Group in less than three weeks, they still had plenty of time left and would have likely done more had Copp not injured himself in a bouldering fall.

In the wake of such a successful trip, one might imagine that the hyperactive duo would be ready to take a break from climbing and rest up, if only for a couple of weeks. "Hell, no," exclaims Pennings. "We only did three routes. I'm chomping at the bit!"