



## AAC Publications

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### Alone on Annapurna

**In 1984, Swiss alpinists** Norbert Joos and Erhard Loretan ventured with a small team up the seven-kilometer-long east ridge of Annapurna, which borders the south face in a rippling line of subpeaks and summits. For the final four days on the crest, the two men continued alone in alpine style through squalls of wind, committing themselves to total solitude between heaven and earth. In *Les 8000 Rugissants*, Loretan wrote, "I've never felt as far away from the living and as close to the dead."

Loretan became my idol. He helped bring a revolutionary approach to the Himalaya, achieving the best results by moving remarkably fast and light across vast stretches of terrain. In 1986 he and Jean Troillet climbed and descended the north face of Everest in a mere 43 hours. Years later, Loretan and I went to the Himalaya together, and I pestered him with questions about Everest. He was very clever: Because they'd free-soloed through the darkness, he and Troillet didn't have to bring ropes or a tent: They only stopped climbing during the day, when the temperatures were warm. With less time up high, they felt they had less risk of objective hazards and altitude sickness. It was a simple, efficient, and intelligent solution. The Polish alpinist Voytek Kurtyka proposed that such ultra-minimalism could change everything. But the 1986 Everest climb baffled most climbers, and no one has managed to replicate it.

Then, in 1992, two French climbers, Pierre Béghin and Jean-Christophe Lafaille, envisioned another beautiful ascent: a direct path up the south face of Annapurna that could be climbed in lightweight style. They reached 7,400 meters before they had to retreat in a gale. Béghin fell to his death when a single-cam rappel anchor failed, and Lafaille clung to an ice slab without a partner or a rope. A five-day descent began. Although he found a 20-meter cord in a lower camp, he soon ran out of food. Rockfall broke his arm. "I thought about letting go, about joining Pierre," he admitted.

Only Lafaille's technical abilities allowed him to survive. For years afterward, he felt like a "prisoner of Annapurna," and he reattempted the south face in 1995 and 1998. In 2002, Lafaille and Alberto Inurrategi traversed the east ridge to the top, and he felt, "for the first time, I could think of Annapurna not as merely a place of morbid statistics and personal loss, but as the Goddess of Abundance."

In 2007, I arrived beneath the south face of Annapurna, determined to complete Béghin and Lafaille's brilliant, unfinished line. My first attempt, solo, ended after a couple of hundred meters. The air was too warm, and a stone hit my head, knocking me unconscious. Only luck kept me from dying. By then, like Lafaille, I was possessed. I wanted at all costs to climb this route. A year later, Simon Anthamatten and I advanced to 6,000 meters before we realized it was hopeless. Snow fell every day, and the avalanche risk was too high. One night a call for help reached us: Iñaki Ochoa de Olza was dangerously ill in Camp IV (7,500m), halfway along the east ridge. Two days later I reached Iñaki, but he didn't survive. Afterward, I just wanted to go home and forget Annapurna. It took years before I could accept what had happened.

By the autumn of 2013, I felt ready to return to Annapurna, together with Don Bowie from Canada. Our team established an advanced base camp at 5,000 meters, where Tenji Sherpa and Nima Sherpa kept us supplied with fresh food. On October 8, at 5:30 a.m., Don and I climbed toward the foot of the wall. Finally, everything seemed to be yielding for us, although a strong wind blew. When we arrived at the bergschrund, however, Don stared up at the glaze of ice that coated the rocks, and he concluded that

the route was too close to his limits to climb without a rope. There aren't many words for such moments. "See you," I said.

At first it was difficult to get used to being alone, but the hard snow helped me focus. I had no firm plans, and thought I might just acclimatize some more, but the great conditions kept pulling me upward. I picked up the tent and stove that Don and I had stashed at 6,100 meters, but I left the rope since I was already carrying a 6mm cord. Higher up, as I photographed the face, a heavy flow of spindrift swept over me and I grabbed onto both of my ice tools, dropping my camera and one of my gloves. From then on, I had to climb in my lighter gloves.

Above 6,800 meters I climbed inside a thickening cloud. Before me, the headwall crested in a giant band of gray and brown rock, striated with runnels of ice and snow. I decided to set up my tent. There were two possible outcomes: Either the wind would ease and I'd be able to go higher, or I'd have to retreat in the morning. Since I couldn't find a sheltered spot right there, I began to climb down. One hundred meters lower, a crevasse offered a perfect bivouac site. I was now inside the mountain, surrounded and protected by its blue ice and white snow. The last rays of sun vanished, and the mountain grew quiet, just as I'd noticed the previous evening from advanced base camp. Night fell quickly. This was my chance. The only way I'd reach this summit would be to climb into the dark.

A silvery line of ice and firn crossed most of the headwall—it seemed it would be possible to find the way. And I like climbing in the dark. When you shrink your field of vision to a headlamp's lighted cone, you're forced to concentrate on the task at hand. Everything else becomes unimportant. Merely the next step, the next movement, is decisive.

I felt as if I were moving inside a luminous bubble. The rest of the world had vanished, apart from this small light moving through the sharp, black air. Flows of ice and snow surged into each other, forming an ideal surface for soloing. Although the cold was a little tiresome, a kind of happiness filled me: I was climbing on, and I felt at home. The terrain reminded me of the Eiger north face in peak winter conditions—demanding, yet not so difficult that I needed to tether myself to the mountain.

It's hard to say how many pitches I climbed, but I sensed that I arrived relatively fast at the upper end of the headwall. There, for the first time, I became aware of where I actually was and what that meant. The rest of the climb would be a race between me and the wind. Either I'd make it to the top before the gusts picked up again or I'd be forced back down. Step by step, I regained my rhythm, and the noises in my head grew quieter. Now you just have to fight on a bit.

When I stood on the summit ridge, I could hardly believe the landscape that spread out before me. Nothing seemed real. Yet at the same time, I still felt rational. There was no place in my mind for anything except the light of my headlamp, the search for the way ahead and the night sky blazing with stars. I checked my altimeter and followed the crest to the highest point. Up, OK, now down. I felt electrified with energy: I wanted to get down as soon as possible, before the wind came up or the rising sun melted the good neve. The bergschrund far below was my real summit. Scarcely five minutes passed before I began to descend. At a few steep sections I stopped to rappel. The cold stiffened my hands, and I kept having to warm them. My tracks faded endlessly into the deep. If only I were already down!

Around 4 a.m. I crawled inside my tent without taking off my crampons. I rested for as long as it took to boil water. My calves felt as hard as rocks. In the east, the sun slowly breached the horizon. But I didn't notice the colors of the dawn. I merely hoped the wind would hold back a little. On the other side of the bergschrund I saw only white, empty snow. I continued down alone, traversing the glacier. When Tenji, Don, and photographer Dan Patitucci arrived, my first words were, "We can go home!" Tenji gave me some soda, bread, and an apple. I could hardly summon any words—I didn't know what I should say. It was all over. It felt like deliverance. At last.

## Summary

New route on the south face of Annapurna (8,091m), climbed solo by Ueli Steck on October 8–9, 2013. The Swiss climber completed the route started by Pierre Beghin and Jean-Christophe Lafaille (1992, to 7,400m). He reached the summit around 1 a.m., after a brief stop at ca 6,800m. He downclimbed most of the face, making only eight rappels with a single 6mm rope, and returned to the bergschrund 28 hours after starting.

## About the Author

**Ueli Steck, 37, lives outside Interlaken, Switzerland.** A note on this article: The author requested that the AAJ adapt his story from *Alpinist* 45 (Winter 2013), and this was done with the kind permission of *Alpinist*'s editor. The original story was translated from German by Adam Oberlin.

**[Note: This is the first section of a three-part feature article. Read Part II "SOLO, ALPINE-STYLE, NEW ROUTE, 8,000 METERS" by Lindsay Griffin below. Read Part III "ANNAPURNA AT LAST" by Yannick Graziani.]**

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## SOLO, ALPINE-STYLE, NEW ROUTE, 8,000 METERS

With his Annapurna ascent, Steck joined a small, highly elite club: only a handful of people have made an alpine-style solo ascent of an independent new route to the main summit of an 8,000-meter peak.

The most famous example is Reinhold Messner on the Diamir Face of Nanga Parbat in 1978. While the route was non-technical, it was committing and had considerable objective danger—a line that could only be contemplated by a fast-moving climber. The route is now 35 years old and has not been repeated.

In 1981, Jerzy Kukuczka soloed Makalu's northwest ridge, though his approach to 7,400 meters involved variants to the normal route. Pierre Béghin made a solo tra-verse of Makalu in 1989, a year no one else summited the mountain, via a new route up the south face—it was the pinnacle of his mountaineering career. However, with two other climbers he'd already fixed rope to 7,200 meters, and the upper part of his line was common to the slovenian route.

In 1993 Polish legend Krzysztof Wielicki soloed the southwest face of Xixabangma, following a previously unclimbed 50° snow couloir to the right of the 1982 British route. From 7,700 meters he followed the previously climbed south ridge to the summit. This was the first time a new route on an 8,000-meter peak had been soloed in a single push and in a day.

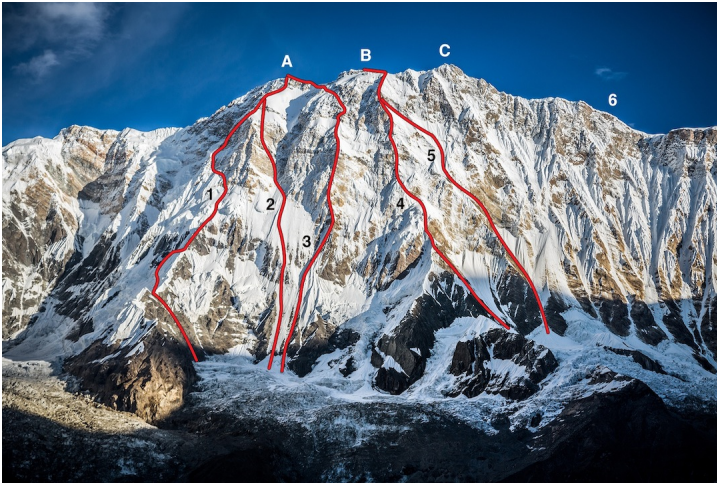
The following year saw the remarkable two-day solo of a new route on the 2,000-meter southwest face of Cho Oyu by the Japanese Yasushi Yamanoi. On the same mountain, in 2006, Slovenian Pavle Kozjek soloed a partial new route on the south face, joining the previously climbed west ridge after crossing a technical section at 7,200 meters. Kozjek reached the summit in less than 15 hours.

Asked to name the climbers and routes that most inspired his Annapurna solo, Steck cited Erhard Loretan, first and foremost, but also the first alpine-style ascent of Annapurna's south face (Bohigas-Lucas, 1984), Reinhold Messner's solo of Mt. Everest (1980), the Béghin-Profit alpine-style partial new route on K2 in 1991, and, more recently, the ski mountaineer and speed climber Kilian Jornet. "At present I am inspired by the whole ski mountaineering scene. To see how fast those guys are able to climb is

crazy." — Lindsay Griffin

**[Note: This is the first and second section of a three-part feature article. Read Part III "ANNAPURNA AT LAST" by Yannick Graziani.]**

## Images



the ca 2,500-meter south face of Annapurna. (A) Main summit (8,091m). (B) Middle summit (8,051m). (C) east summit (8,026m). (1) British route (Haston-Whillans, 1970). (2) Steck route (2013); climbed to ca 7,400m by Pierre Béghin and Jean-Christophe Lafaille in 1992; repeated alpine-style by Stéphane Benoist and Yannick Graziani two weeks after Steck. (3) Japanese route (Aota-Yanagisawa, 1981). (4) Polish route (Berbeka-Probulski, 1981), to central summit. (5) Catalan route (Bohigas-Lucas, 1984, first alpine-style ascent of the south face, to central summit). This route was climbed to 7,150m, alpine-style, by Alex MacIntyre and René Ghilini, in 1982. (6) east ridge (Joos-Loretan, 1984).



October 8: Ueli Steck begins his solo ascent of the south face.





Back in Kathmandu, Steck goes over the details of his ascent with Elizabeth Hawley.



Nil Bohigas during the breakthrough alpine-style ascent of Annapurna's south face in 1984.



Nil Bohigas during the breakthrough alpine-style ascent of Annapurna's south face in 1984.



"Annapurna," original 10-by-20-inch acrylic painting by Colorado artist Jesse Crock ([jessecrockart.com](http://jessecrockart.com)).

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