



AAC Publications

Annapurna at Last

After a committing eight-day climb, my friend Stéphane Benoist and I reached the summit of Annapurna via the south face. I had been to Annapurna twice before: once in 2000 with Christian Trommsdorff and Patrick Wagnon, and then in 2010 with Stéphane. Last fall we finally completed the climb, but not without consequences. When we returned to Europe I had a mild case of frostbite, and Stéphane lost his toes and parts of the fingers on his right hand. It will be a while before he can climb again. So you could say we did not succeed 100 percent, but only around 51 percent.

Stéphane and I both work as guides in Europe, and the weather last summer was good day after day, so we very busy. Despite this we somehow got on the plane to Nepal on August 15. We looked forward to our adventure with a mix of anticipation and confidence in our fitness and preparation.

Instead of setting up a base camp, we planned to stay at the Annapurna Sanctuary Lodge between acclimatization climbs, so our logistics were fast and easy. Our plan was to acclimatize in the valley leading up to Annapurna III and Gangapurna. We did the first ascent of a nice, unnamed 6,505-meter peak and ended up spending two nights on top. After a month of training, we left the lodge on October 16 to approach the big south face of Annapurna.

We had spent the past month going over and over our plan for the climb: which line to try, what equipment to carry, and how long we expected it would take. We also talked with Ueli Steck at the Sanctuary about his plans and ours, but by the time we returned from our last acclimatization climb he had already done the face and left. The five-hour approach up the glacier gives you time to think. Now I cannot remember much of what went through my mind, but I think everyone who has been through a similar experience understands what I mean.

At 5,000 meters we set up our tent, and the next day we got an early start, making an exhausting push through deep snow to the base of the route. The south wall is so massive and vertical that the top disappears as you get close to the bottom. It's nearly impossible to find even one square meter of flat ground for the tent. In the afternoon we set our first camp at around 6,100 meters and talked about the coming days. The forecast seemed a bit less stable than what we had expected, but we decided to continue. At about 6,650 meters, we found an uncomfortable yet magical place for a tent site, chopped out of a snow rib. In the end, we stayed three nights there and waited for better weather, because it would be pure suicide to ascend a vertical mountain when it is snowing every afternoon.

On the morning of the 20th we set off again. After hours on steep slopes, we reached the yellow rock band above 7,000 meters and climbed a few of the most difficult pitches of the entire climb. Stéphane climbed beautifully—it was as if I were at the theater! Night forced us to improvise a bivouac on a small ledge at 7,100 meters, without our tent. My mattress was dead because of a small leak. Hell, I thought, I will freeze my ass off the rest of the climb!

The morning sun warmed us as we melted some ice for tea before setting off. That day, October 22, was the kind of day you will remember for a long time. Runnels of ice gave us a natural line to follow through the yellow rock—difficult but nice. We skirted a large black roof by climbing a frozen waterfall.

The natural line led us right to what we thought would be our final bivouac, at 7,450 meters. But the following morning we discovered that we were too far left and we had to traverse back to the right. We were moving very slowly now, and we lost a few hours finding the way, and so after one more very technical pitch we dug another bivouac ledge at 7,600 meters.

At 11 a.m. we stood on the summit of Annapurna, filled with an immense feeling of happiness and satisfaction. October 24 was my 40th birthday, and the summit was a wonderful place to celebrate with my old friend from St. Jeannet (a crag near Nice), where we both started climbing at age 15.

That night we slept on the same ledge at 7,600 meters and tried to recover. The wind picked up to about 100 km/h. I didn't feel well that night, and I nearly froze outside the tent as I organized the gear to assure an early start the next morning. Our plan was to rappel to our first bivouac at 6,100 meters—a long way down. Stéphane felt weak, and we didn't yet understand that he was suffering from pneumonia and frostbite. I had to manage the rappels for both of us. Everything felt "prearranged" in my mind, as if someone else had taken hold of me—not because of the altitude but because I was in survival mode.

Finally, at 2 or 3 in the morning, we reached that first bivy ledge. Now I knew we would survive, but I also knew that a rescue would be essential for Stéphane. The next day, on the 26th, we called for a helicopter. Standing on the snow at 5,000 meters, with only half a cartridge of gas and a few cookies left, I waited for the helicopter to arrive. Normally I hate helicopters, but at that moment I thought, What a wonderful machine! I am grateful to JB Gurung from the Annapurna Sanctuary Lodge and all of the pilots of Simrik Air. Annapurna is behind us now, and life will go on. Stéphane is recovering in Nice, and I am in Chamonix. The cold weather has passed and spring is around the corner, with the renewal that warmth brings. Life is full of good things.

Summary

Alpine-style second ascent of the Steck Route on Annapurna by Stéphane Benoist and Yannick Graziani (France), October 16–26, 2013. The French pair used a different start than Steck and made a few variations through the headwall. They reported difficulties approaching WI5 and M5+/M6 above 7,000m, and M4/M5 at ca 7,500m.

About the Author

Yannick Graziani, 40, is a mountain guide based in Chamonix, France.

[Note: This is the third section of a three-part feature article. Read Part I "ALONE ON ANNAPURNA" by Ueli Steck and Part II "SOLO, ALPINE-STYLE, NEW ROUTE, 8,000 METERS" by Lindsay Griffin.]

Images



Yannick Graziani in the exposed bivy site where the pair spent three nights.



Yannick Graziani below the headwall at ca 7,000m. Ueli Steck had described "once in a century" ice conditions on the face.



Above the headwall on Annapurna's south face.



Graziani approaches the summit. Behind him is Annapurna South (7,219m). Behind left: Hiunchuli.



stéphane Benoist leads steep ice at ca 7,300m.

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