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Uli Biaho Tower, Attempt, First Ascent of Lower Northeast Pillar

Asia, Pakistan, Baltoro Muztagh

Basile Petiot, Benoit Monfort, and Mathieu Detrie from France and I (from Belgium) traveled to Pakistan in July, hoping to climb the direct northeast pillar of Uli Biaho (6,109m), a virgin line of 2,100m. This is composed of two distinct parts. The first is a magnificent 1,000m big wall that ends at a hanging glacier. Above this soars a mixed prow, also 1,000m. After studying the proposed line, we realized that the second part, in addition to presenting technical difficulties that no doubt are extreme, also is very exposed to falling ice from the summit cornices. Given that the difficulties were likely to impose a slow pace, it was out of the question to risk such exposure.

We decided to modify our objective: We would climb the lower pillar and then follow the hanging glacier to the left to reach the couloir that borders the east face; we would climb this for 600m to a col and finish with 500m of the upper south face. [Editor's note: Every successful party on Uli Biaho Tower has climbed the lower part of this couloir to reach the upper walls.] After a day of fixing the first 200m, we understood that the lower pillar would not be simple: The climbing was already 6B+ A3, and not one pitch gave way easily. We returned to base camp and prepared for our attempt.

After four days of bad weather, we started up the wall on July 25, heavily loaded. The climbing continued to be difficult, and we completed only four more pitches that day, much less than expected. Many of the cracks were dirty, and it was very steep. This was not like Indian Creek! The aid climbing was on thin cracks, with micro nuts, beaks, and knifeblades. We slept on a tiny, exposed ledge (we did not bring portaledge or bolts). Already, we were very low on water, and the 600m above us looked completely dry. We needed a little miracle. The next day we continued ever slower, with yet another pitch of A3. We were completely dehydrated. But then the miracle took place: The ledge that would be our host for the night was supplied with a trickle of water with which we could fill our bottles. The next day was fantastic, and we arrived at the top of the previously unclimbed wall after a total of 22 pitches, eight of them with aid. Short on time, we did not walk up the easy ground to the true summit of the lower pillar.

We left during the night to climb the ice couloir. It was very steep: sustained 55° with numerous passages of 60° ice. The altitude, the weight of our packs, and the fatigue from the previous days reduced us to a snail's pace. When we arrived at the 5,600m col that separates the east and south faces, we placed a comfortable bivouac on a ledge that overlooks the col. It began to snow. The following day it was really bad, snowing all day. During a brief lull, we checked out the south face. The rock looked superb, but the first 250m would have sustained difficulties. We returned to our tent hoping for a break in the weather. We had only two more days of food. We called for a weather forecast and learned that three to four more days of bad weather were predicted. After considerable discussion, we decided to go down. Along our descent route, we climbed a small consolation peak (5,700m) that we called Uli Biahette.

Back at base camp, all the accumulated fatigue hit us. The mountain was plastered, and with our permit ending on August 8, we didn't have time for another try. Inevitably, there was a bitter taste in our mouths. But this was a beautiful adventure, engaging and serious on an incredible mountain. The summit was not for us this time, but the face we climbed gave us lot of fun, and the month we spent together was filled with friendship and laughs from start

Images



The Belgian-French line on Uli Biaho Tower. The team completed the first ascent of the lower northeast face.



The author surmounts a wide-crack bulge on the lower pillar.



The view from atop the lower wall: 1,000m down, 1,000m to go.

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