



AAC Publications

Sakaton, Southwest Face

Nepal, Mahalangur Himal – Khumbu Section

After passing initiation tests in Benasque during a cold weekend in February 2012, the new Spanish team for alpinism (Equipo Español de Alpinismo) began its training and improvement program in the Pyrenees and Alps. For two years, led by Mikel Zabalza, director of training, the group climbed great routes—even new ones on some of Spain’s famous walls. And so we came to the final expedition. Mikeltxo Ajuria, Roger Cararach, Alberto Fernandez, Faust Punsola, Mikel Zabalza, and I found ourselves in the Kyashar Valley. The month we had available did not seem long enough for all the potential objectives.

Our first acclimatization peak was Kusum Kanguru Northwest (5,572m), which gave us a beautiful climb up the southeast ridge (300m, V M). We then split the team to climb the east ridge of Kusum Kanguru East as far as a small summit of ca 5,900m (600m, 70° V+ M), and the northeast ridge of Kusum Kanguru Northwest (500m, IV+). Then it was time for the main objectives: Mikel, Mikeltxo, and I would go for the west ridge of Kyashar, while the other three would try a new line on a peak that we would subsequently call Sakaton. [This is Peak 6,325m on the long south ridge of Kangtega. On the opposite side this top rises only a little way above the glacier.]

Snow conditions were bad, and we were forced down from both peaks. Bad weather kept us pinned at base, where there was 30cm of fresh snow. With one week left in the expedition, we all set off for Sakaton, hoping a sunnier aspect would provide more consolidated snow. Mikel, Alberto, and I went first; Roger, Fausto, and Mikeltxo would follow a day later.

We slept the first night at the foot of the southwest face, then followed a wide couloir of 50° threatened by a serac. We climbed unroped for speed, finally slanting left with some relief to the ridge and a rocky area. We climbed 100m up the crest and made our second bivouac. While Mikel excavated the tent platform, Alberto and I climbed two mixed pitches of M5. That night our friends slept at the foot of the face.

Next day we climbed rapidly, simul-climbing slopes of 50–70°, always on the south flank, where we felt the snow would be more stable. We passed the high point of our group’s previous attempt, and then climbed big slopes of snow and ice (sections of 70–80°) to reach a shoulder at 6,200m, breathless. At this point poor snow made upward progress difficult, but watching Mikel gave us a lesson in negotiating adverse snow conditions, and when all three of us reached the summit it was a marvelous moment.

Twenty rappels saw us back at our top bivouac during the night. There we found our colleagues resting in preparation for their summit attempt. When we awoke they were already high on the mountain—they climbed through most of the night and reached the top while we were still descending. We named the route Pura Vida (1,300m, TD+ M5 80°) as a tribute to the late Iñaki Ochoa, who had been a friend of Mikel since childhood.

With this journey we reached the end of an important part of our training to be alpinists. There have been many different experiences over the last few years, which without doubt will help us understand better this strange game, our passions, and the mountains.

Information from **Juan José Cano**, translated by Coral Estevez, Spain

Images



(A) Kusum Kanguru (6,370m). (B) Kusum Kanguru West. (C) Kusum Kanguru Northwest (5,572m), with the northeast ridge facing the camera and southeast ridge the left skyline. Kusum Kanguru East (ca 6,350m) is off picture to the left.



Faust Punsola belaying Alberto Fernandez during the first attempt on the southwest face of Sakaton.



Mikel Zabalza on the final section of unconsolidated snow below the summit of Sakaton.



Looking northeast over the Kyashar Glacier toward: (A) Thamserku (6,618m), (B) Kangtega North (6,685m), (C) Kangtega (6,783m), (D) Sakaton, with Pura Vida marked, and (E) Part of Kyashar (6,770m).



Pura Vida on the southwest face of Sakaton. Two camps are marked. The blue line was used in descent to minimize the risk of objective danger from the serac above the couloir.



Armed with a rack of snow stakes for the unconsolidated snow above, Mikel Zabalza sets out on the final section of Pura Vida, southwest face of Sakaton.

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