



AAC Publications

Bhagirathi IV, West Face, Attempt

India, Western Garhwal, Gangotri

The monsoon had been weak and the mountains looked dry when we arrived at the Nandanvan base camp (4,400m) on August 21. Matteo di Zaiacomo, Luca Schiera, and I hoped to make the first ascent of the west face of Bhagirathi IV (6,193m), a rock wall attempted a number of times during the 1990s by Slovenians, Americans, and Spanish, overcoming difficulties up to UIAA VII and A2. [One year Silvo Karo attempted it no fewer than 11 times without success.] The wall proved to be much steeper than we expected. After 200m of vertical or near vertical granite, the face overhangs for the next 500m, until reaching the schist band below the summit. To me it looks damned similar to El Cap—it even has a "nose" separating the left and right sides.

We first opted for a central line, heading toward a big corner in the middle of the face. When the afternoon sun hit the wall, rock began to fall. We knew rockfall would be a problem; it was one of the main reasons why past parties had failed. But we soon realized the direct line was too hard for our style of climbing—we didn't have the gear necessary to aid the hard sections, and they looked too difficult and scary for us to free climb. We bailed.

A few days later we were back, starting 50m down and to the right of our previous attempt, heading for a line toward the right side of the wall where it is less steep. Bad weather quickly forced us down, but on September 12 everything seemed right and we began again, with Luca leading all the first day to the snowpatch below the upper half of the wall, where we installed our portaledge.

I led the second day, with the temperature well below 0°C. I can't bear the cold as well as Luca, and after a couple of moves my hands and feet were completely numb. At least the climbing suited my style: a corner with a crack that succumbed to mainly jamming and stemming. Fortunately, I've trained on this type of terrain the last few years and it is the kind of climbing I can do in cold and wet conditions. The corner got steeper, and above 5,700m we had to make a decision: either continue up the corner to the black schist, where the band looked much longer but broken and easy, or take a very steep corner/ramp that slanted left across the wall to a point where the schist looked steep but short. Afraid of trying to make the leftward traverse with heavy loads, we continued direct, but ice, fatigue, and the steepness of the final corner forced me to abandon the dream of an onsight free ascent and begin aid climbing. We set the portaledge right below the schist band at ca 5,900m.

Next day we discovered the schist was much steeper than it appeared. It was also very loose and chossy. Luca tried a number of lines, but there was no reliable protection and holds broke in his hands. At 6,000m we couldn't afford to make a mistake. The decision was obvious, though hard to accept.

At base camp we thought consciously about what we had done. Even though we failed, we felt we had done well. It seemed similar to a soccer game where you play well the whole match, score a goal, and control the entire game, until the last few minutes when the opposing team scores a goal and then scores a second in injury time. What makes alpinism interesting is that even if you do well there is still the possibility of failure. [Editor's note: The team later climbed the peak by the "normal route" up the east face.]

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Images



The ca 900m west face of Bhagirathi IV is sandwiched between the walls of Bhagirathi II (left) and the impressive west face of Bhagirathi III. The main Italian attempt is shown.

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