



AAC Publications

Nanda Devi East, Northeast Ridge, Attempt

India, Eastern Garhwal

Mark Thomas and I (U.K.) attempted the unclimbed northeast ridge of Nanda Devi East (7,434m) in the autumn. Nanda Devi East has only one existing route to the summit: the southeast ridge, climbed by a Polish team in 1939, by far the hardest prewar climb in the Himalaya. The northeast ridge has a height gain of 2,000m, starting at a 5,331m col between the Pachu and Lawan valleys, and features complex snow and ice terrain throughout. The first 1,400m follow the lateral east-facing spur on this divide, meeting the true northeast ridge at 6,700m. Although it's an obvious challenge, the only team known to have considered an ascent was Julie-Ann Clyma and Roger Payne (U.K.), who approached from the Pachu Valley in 1994 but were unable to find any safe access to the ridge. By contrast, the Lawan Valley approach is quick and simple.

Our initial team included Tom Coney, Kenton Cool (both U.K.), and Dave Morton (USA), and we established base camp on September 16 at Bhital Gwar in the Lawan Valley at 4,275m. On the 18th an advanced camp was established at 5,300m, close to the starting col. An attack of sinusitis and a family bereavement then reduced the team to two: Mark, 40, and me, 60 years old. Between the 19th and 22nd, Mark and I made an acclimatization climb on the route. The main feature of the lower section is a beautiful snow and ice arête with an angle in excess of 55°. From a camp at 5,850m in a bergschrund, this ridge was climbed in six 60m pitches. The arête was capped by a band of ice cliffs, but a way was found on the right-hand side (WI4) to a high point of 6,100m.

After a rest at base camp we set off for our summit attempt on September 24. Unstable weather produced regular snowfalls in the afternoon and evening. The fresh snow helpfully stuck to the ice on the steep sections, but made easier-angled slopes arduous. A camp on a small perch was made at 6,200m, above the ice cliff. Then the ridge broke into a complex zone of ice walls and labyrinthine crevasse fields. Bad weather on the 27th enforced an early camp at 6,400m. After we escaped from the labyrinth, easier slopes of deep powder led to a campsite at 6,640m under an ice cliff. Here we decided to go for the summit with bivy gear and two days' supplies. There was a direct route to the final slopes, but this climbed under the summit seracs for some way and was loaded with fresh snow. There was no choice but to break out right to gain the crest of the northeast ridge lower down at 6,750m.

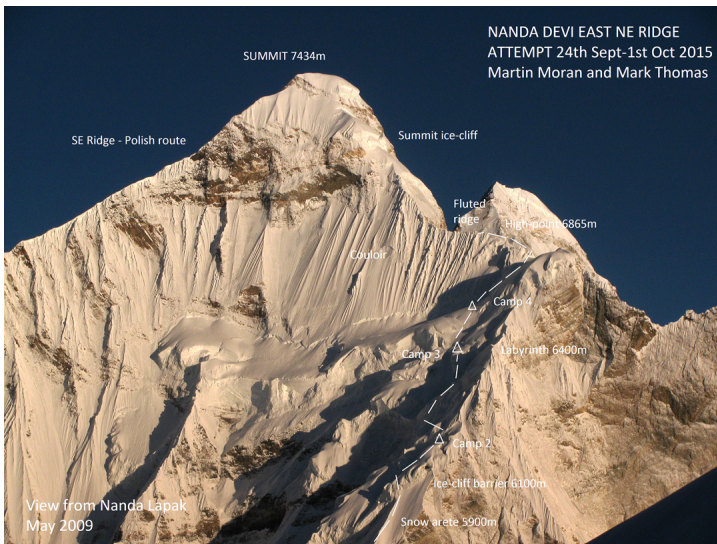
Our hopes were high, but 100m higher the ridge narrowed into a sensational knife-edge of unconsolidated snow. Faced with a 500m horizontal section with 65° powder-snow flutes to the north and overhanging mushrooms on the south, the decision to retreat was obvious and immediate. Our high point was at 6,865m. Through the night we descended 1,300m to the bottom of the ridge, with 14 abseils from ice threads and much downclimbing. With more stable snow conditions and careful assessment of the state of the summit seracs, the alternative line up a broad couloir to bypass the fluted section of ridge could be feasible.

Martin Moran, Alpine Club, U.K.

Images



Nanda Devi East with the line of the 2015 attempt on the northeast ridge. The 1939 Polish route is the left skyline.



The attempted route on the northeast ridge of Nanda Devi East. The main summit of Nanda Devi is visible behind.



Martin Moran on the lower section of the northeast ridge of Nanda Devi East.



Mark Thomas approaching the ice barrier at 6,100m on the northeast ridge of Nanda Devi East.



Looking northwest from Changuch to Nanda Devi (left) and Nanda Devi East. (1) The 1939 Polish route up the southeast ridge. (2) The east spur and northeast ridge.



Mark Thomas exiting from the labyrinth of crevasses on day five of the attempt on Nanda Devi East's northeast ridge. Nanda Kot (6,861m) and the (lower) pointed Changuch (6,322m) are behind.



Top camp at 6,640m on the northeast ridge of Nanda Devi East. The fluted upper ridge and summit seracs are above. The high point was the large mushroom/cornice toward the near end of the ridge.



Martin Moran at the high point on the northeast ridge of Nanda Devi East, with the sharp, horizontal snow ridge that thwarted the attempt, and the summit pyramid, behind.

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