



Nilgiri South, South Face and Tragedy

Nepal, Annapurna Himal

From October 22–26, Hansjörg Auer, Alex Blumel, and Gerry Fiegl made the first ascent of the south face of Nilgiri South (6,839m), only the second overall ascent of this mountain. Nilgiri South was climbed in 1978 by a Japanese team that approached from the north and climbed the east ridge. Attention then turned to the south side. In 1981 the south face was attempted to 5,740m by Japanese climbers. (Later the same year Japanese also climbed the southwest ridge to 6,100m.) Japanese climbers were back in 1985 but only reached 5,900m on the south face. In 1996 the advanced base of a Slovenian expedition, sited at the bottom of the south face, was swept away before the team had a chance to begin an attempt, but they returned in 1999. Finding the central part of the face too objectively dangerous, they climbed the left side to reach the southwest ridge at 6,100m, then continued up to 6,600m, where they were forced to retreat in strong wind and snowfall.

The three Austrians first spent time establishing a higher base camp than previous parties, so they could better see the south face. Auer had just returned from Mt. Kenya and was quite well acclimatized, but the other two were not. The three spent two nights at advanced base (5,300m) below the south face. After a rest at base camp, they started their ascent on October 22. On the 23rd they crossed the bergschrund at 5,400m and started up the ramp used by the Japanese on their 1981 attempt (60–90°). At 6,000m they continued up right on the more difficult terrain (M5 70°) of the west face of a subsidiary summit to the southeast of Nilgiri South, which they christened Nilgiri Spire (6,780m). After surmounting a big serac barrier at about 6,500m they found a good bivouac site.

Leaving at 6 a.m. on the 24th, the three climbed up to the south ridge of Nilgiri Spire at 6,600m and continued to its summit at 11 a.m. They descended to the col between this and Nilgiri South via an exposed and corniced ridge, at one point making a 30m free rappel. At 3 p.m. they came across a nice, flat bivouac site at 6,740m.

Starting out at 8 a.m. the following morning, Fiegl was very slow. The team continued the 1km traverse to reach the top of Nilgiri South at 11 a.m., having surmounted a steep cornice on the last pitch. They immediately began a descent of the unclimbed southwest ridge, which proved far more technical and difficult than expected. Fiegl was now extremely exhausted, and on reaching 6,500m at 3 p.m. the other two realized they had to stop and bivouac in order to give him a chance to recover. He was now suffering badly from altitude sickness and appeared to be no longer aware of the situation.

The forecast predicted strong winds the following day, and after a cold night the three set off down a sharp snow ridge, climbing unroped for speed. At 2 p.m., at the end of this section (ca 6,100m), there was a small step. While downclimbing it, Fiegl slipped and fell 800m down the south face in a complex couloir system. Shocked, the other two made three rappels on the south flank and then continued downclimbing, rappelling the last section. All the way down they found traces of the fall, but did not locate the body. They gained the glacier at 6 p.m. Auer commented: "When a good friend falls and dies in front of you, everything else loses importance. Our expedition could not have ended worse."

Lindsay Griffin, with information from Hansjörg Auer, Austria

Images



Alex Blumel and Gerry Fiegl at ca 6,200m on day one, climbing difficult ice and mixed ground below Nilgiri Spire.



Gerry Fiegl on the steep mixed ground of the south face.



Nilgiri South, showing the line of ascent (right, over Nilgiri Spire), descent via the southwest ridge, and bivouacs.



Hansjörg Auer on difficult mixed terrain to gain a thin ice spur on the west side of Nilgiri Spire.



Hansjörg Auer (in front) and Gerry Fiegl pick their way along the traverse between Nilgiri Spire and Nilgiri South.



Hansjörg Auer leading the last pitch of the big serac at ca 6,500m. A little above this the climbers made their first bivouac.

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